

van Inwagen on materialism and life after death

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1 The Notre Dame view of resurrection vs. the biblical view

van Inwagen begins by contrasting the view of resurrection which he thinks is common among Notre Dame undergraduates with the view that he finds in the Bible:

“Most people in most cultures believe in a life beyond the grave. They tell stories about it. But not all cultures tell the same story. ... In our western culture there is a tendency to tell stories of the sort we see in the movie *Ghost* ...

In this movie, dead people rise from their corpses, and have a kind of diaphanous existence. They look like human beings (to anyone who can see them at all), but they are able to pass through living people and walls and other solid things. (Why don't they fall through the floor, then? You may well ask.) And, of course, they are for the most part invisible to the living. Eventually, bright beings summon them to ascend a beam of light to heaven, or dark, gibbering creatures drag them screaming off to hell. This is, I am afraid, exactly the picture of the afterlife that is current among undergraduates at Notre Dame ... every time they are present at the baptism of a child, they promise to help the parents and godparents of the newly baptized bring the child up in a faith one of whose tenets is (they say these words), “I believe in the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.” But these words mean nothing to them. They say them, but they are getting no more meaning out of them than a famous six-year-old did from another well-known text; reciting the Lord's Prayer, he said, And lead us not into Penn Station. A few days ago, I heard a speech by the President of Notre Dame about the difficulties of teaching theology to Notre Dame undergraduates. President Malloy remarked sententiously that we cannot presuppose, as we once could, that our students will bring some degree of catechetical formation to the study of theology. I don't think he knows the half of it.”

However, van Inwagen says, this picture is very different from the one we get from the Bible:

“This picture of death and immortality, the Hollywood-and-Notre-Dame- undergraduate picture, is, I believe, very far from the biblical picture of death

and immortality. According to the bible, God formed us out of the dust of the earth and breathed life into us. When, in punishment for our rebellion against him we die and return to the dust out of which he raised our first parents, were just, well ... dead.

...

...In the New Testament, there is only one change in this picture, a piece of good news. None of the inspired descriptions of the nature of death in the Old Testament was wrong, the NT says, but these descriptions were not the whole story. In Christ, death retains its nature but its sting is drawn, for through his saving action, the dead will live again."

2 The possibility of materialist resurrection

But, as van Inwagen says, acceptance of the Biblical rather than a Platonic — or Notre Dame undergraduate — view of persons and the resurrection raises a difficult metaphysical question: "Is resurrection possible, given materialism?" (The considerations which make this a difficult question are the same as the ones we discussed in connection with Baker's view.)

van Inwagen thinks that the answer to this metaphysical question is "yes":

"Before I was a Christian, or a theist of any sort, when I was a sort of fellow traveler, I proposed a solution to this problem that has, let us say, not won wide assent. ... I suggested that God could accomplish the resurrection of, say, Socrates, in the following way. He could have, in 399 BC, have miraculously translated Socrates' fresh corpse to some distant place for safe-keeping (at the same time removing the hemlock and undoing the physiological damage it had done) and have replaced it with a simulacrum, a perfect physical duplicate of Socrates' corpse; later, on the day of resurrection, he could reanimate Socrates' corpse, and the reanimated corpse, no longer a corpse but once more a living organism, would be Socrates. Or, I suggested, he might do this with some part of the corpse, its brain or brain-stem or left cerebral hemisphere or cerebral cortex something whose presence in a newly whole human organism would insure that that organism be Socrates.

No one, as I say, was convinced ..."

But, even if no one was convinced, it is not obvious that there is a convincing objection to the view that this is possible. (He considers several theological objections on pp. 8-9.)

But van Inwagen's suggestion is not so much that this is how the resurrection will take place, but rather that the story illustrates its compatibility with materialism. It is a "just-so" story which is such that, when we see it, even if we don't think that it is true, we can see that it illustrates a genuine possibility which might be actualized in ways that we can't imagine. The analogy with the case of Lord Kelvin and length of time during which life has existed on earth:

“Despite overwhelming evidence (provided by the fossil record) that there had been life on the earth for hundreds of millions of years, the great nineteenth-century physicist Lord Kelvin insisted that the sun had been shining for at most twenty million years. He maintained that the only conceivable mechanism of solar radiation was this: the sun is undergoing very gradual gravitational contraction, and solar radiation is due to the resulting gradual transformation of gravitational potential energy into radiant energy. When you plug the sun’s mass, radius, and surface temperature into the appropriate equations (Kelvin contended), you will find that the sun cannot have been putting out radiant energy at anything like its current level for more than twenty million years.

Lord Kelvin’s calculations were (I understand) correct: Given his premise about the mechanism of solar radiation, his conclusion follows. Twentieth-century nuclear physics, however, has supplied the real mechanism of solar radiation, and we now know that Kelvin’s premise and conclusion were both wrong . . . Even in the nineteenth century, however, . . . it would have been possible to tell “just-so stories” according to which the sun had been shining for hundreds of millions of years. Here is the beginning of one: The sun is made up of rapidly spinning atoms; continual collisions between these atoms result in their kinetic energy of rotation being gradually transformed into radiant energy. If one continues the story by specifying (for some particular moment in the past) the right average rotational kinetic energy for the solar atoms, and the right average linear velocity and mean free path of the atoms between collisions, and the right average loss of rotational kinetic energy in each collision, the resulting filled-out story will have the consequence that the sun has been producing light and heat at its present level for hundreds of millions of years — or for any period one likes.

This is, of course, a “just-so story”: although it serves to establish a possibility, it isn’t true. In fact — as Kelvin would certainly have been quick to point out — it is, miracles apart, a preposterous story, for no imaginable physical mechanism could have produced the initial conditions (the enormous rotational kinetic energy of the solar atoms) the story postulates. And yet, in a way, the story is true. There is one very abstract and very important feature that the sun-in-the-story shares with the real sun: most of the energy that the sun gives off in the form of light and heat was not stored before it was radiated as gravitational potential energy, but rather in the inner dynamics of the atoms of which the sun is composed. (In the story as kinetic energy of rotation; in the real world as nuclear binding energy.)”

Can van Inwagen’s story about the possibility of resurrection plausibly be viewed in that way?

3 Criticisms of the ‘Constitution View’

van Inwagen, after describing Baker’s view of constitution and persons, states his intuitive reasons for rejecting the view:

“I have only one major objection to ‘constitution theory’: I can’t bring myself to take seriously the idea that constitution is real. It seems to me as obvious as anything can be that if a piece of plastic becomes a driver’s license, that’s like a man becoming a husband: entirely a matter of a pre-existent thing acquiring a new legal status. It seems equally obvious to me that there is nothing numerically distinct from me that is spatially coextensive with me. ... I retain a complacent, unworried conviction that these things that seem obvious to me deserve to seem obvious to anyone who considers them. Well, that’s philosophy.”

But he has a further worry about Baker’s use of constitution to provide for the possibility of life after death, which is connected to his objections to the psychological view of personal identity (which we discussed when we read van Inwagen’s argument for materialism about persons).

“my antecedent understanding of ‘first-person perspective’ and ‘is identical with’ are not sufficient for my understanding ‘the first-person perspective of x is identical with the first-person perspective of y’. I need some sort of definition, some explicit statement of meaning. And, unfortunately, the only definition I can think of ... is this:

The first-person perspective of x is identical with the first-person perspective of y = df
x has a first-person perspective and y has a first-person perspective
and x is identical with y.

But if this is what identity of first-person perspectives means, then it’s hard to see how being told that God can make a post-resurrection person me by giving that person a first-person perspective numerically identical with mine explains anything. ... for an essential part of giving a person a first-person perspective identical with mine is to make that person identical with me. And how God might do that is just what identity of first-person perspectives was supposed to help us to understand. ... It seems to me that the materialist who believes in the general resurrection is, so to speak, stuck with saying that there must somehow be some sort of physical continuity between the person who dies in the present age of the world and the person who is raised on the day of resurrection. If human persons are physical substances, nothing but physical continuity can ground the identity of human persons across time. The problem for the ‘Christian materialist,’ therefore, is to try to present a plausible theory according to which such physical continuity exists.”

How would you state this argument? Is it plausible for Baker to reply by rejecting the suggested analysis of sameness of first-person perspective? Should she then have to offer another analysis? How might one go?