**“Can We Survive our Deaths?”**

 **David Hershenov and Rose Hershenov**

**I. Introduction**

To answer the question of whether we can survive our deaths we must first ascertain what kind of entity we are, i.e., get clear about our essence. It is conceivable that if what we are fundamentally is a certain kind of *material* being, then having such a nature makes it impossible for us to exist posthumously. That said, it is still the case that some theories of what we are seem more plausible than others for reasons independent of whether they can promise us an afterlife. We think that is true of views like Aristotle’s that construe us as essentially living animals. Alas, it would be easier for us to provide an account of how we can exist posthumously if we shared Plato and Descartes’ views that we are identical to an immaterial soul that just ceases to be related to the body at death. The worry that some philosophers have about our view is that given our animal bodies are destroyed at death, or soon afterwards, then even God can’t restored us to life. Nevertheless, we believe a metaphysically plausible case can be made for the possibility of deceased human animals coming back to life.

We will restrict our inquiry to Western metaphysics, where the historically leading candidates to the question “What am I?” are an immaterial soul, a compound of a soul and body, a fully material human animal, an ensouled animal, or a person characterized by some sort of sophisticated mental capacities that most other sentient creatures lack. The last account, traceable back most notably to John Locke, is compatible with construing persons as having immaterial souls as well as their being composed of only matter. Some modern Lockean-inspired accounts of personhood envision us replacing our frail, dying, organic bodies with healthier bodies, perhaps even longer lasting bionic ones. Such views of an afterlife don’t have their fate tied to God’s existence, so they will appeal to atheists and agnostics. Soul theories typically involve a God creating the soul or sustaining it in the afterlife, thus inheriting whatever weaknesses or strengths that are to be found in theistic views.

**II. Souls and Divinely Sustained Afterlives**

Thereare different versions of soul theories. The best known, call it “pure dualism,” is that you are identical to your soul. You stand in an intimate relation to your body, but your body is not a part of you. An alternative version, “compound dualism,” is that you are a compound of two substances, a soul and a body.[[1]](#endnote-1) You are not your soul. You literally possess bodily organs as parts and thus have a mass and physical location.

There are various reasons to accept some sort of soul theory. One has to do with the difficulty that rival materialist accounts have in explaining how our brains produce thought. Philosophers from Leibniz to McGinn have trouble “conceiving of how technicolor phenomenology can arise from soggy grey matter.”[[2]](#endnote-2) Strawson claims that making sense of how thought emerges from non-thinking atoms is like trying to explain how the abstract arises from the concrete or the extended from the unextended.[[3]](#endnote-3) Moreover, if beliefs and desires are stored in the brain, that would appear to imply they had volume and mass. That seems like a category mistake akin to claiming that abstract numbers are colored. How can the thought that “Proust is more subtle than L’Amour” be neurologically realized or indicated by neurons firing?[[4]](#endnote-4) Materialist accounts also have trouble explaining the unity of our experience. The sights, sounds, and smells presented to you at dinner tonight will be experienced as a unity. But if different parts of the brain are responsible for different aspect of the entire experience, how would such a complex entity produce a *unified* experience? The simple (partless) composition of the soul seems better able to account for the unity of experience.[[5]](#endnote-5)

The simplicity of the soul is also a reason for thinking persons survive death. Complex entities can be destroyed, i.e., disintegrate into their parts. But a soul has no parts into which it can be can be decomposed. So the simple soul seems a good candidate for survival. It may be that the soul doesn’t literally die as it not a living entity instantiating life processes such as metabolism and homeostasis. So death of the ensouled needs to be reconstrued as the soul ceasing to stand in a certain relationship to a living body when that body dies, i.e., ceasing irreversibly to instantiate life processes.

It is easier to conceive of an afterlife of the person construed according to the tenets of pure dualism than compound dualism, despite the latter satisfying our sense of being extended and embodied. Compound dualists deny the pure dualist’s claim that you are your soul, instead insisting that the soul is merely one of your parts, albeit the essential part, while your body is but a contingent part. So, the compound dualist has it that at death you would leave your body behind and come to be composed of a single immaterial part, your soul. One problem plaguing the compound dualist’s conception of the afterlife is that it is hard to understand how something can have just a single part. If it is not a conceptual truth, it is certainly typically the case that composition involves two or more parts. If x is a proper part of y then it seems that y must have another part that doesn’t overlap x. But according to compound dualism, the relationship between you and your soul in the afterlife would involve you becoming a purely immaterial entity intimately involved with but distinct from your soul. Your immaterial soul is your only part. Thus you would be an immaterial being consisting of a distinct immaterial entity and no other parts. Eric Olson complains that the view “suffers from a sort of ontological double vision. …and I lose my grip on what it is for one thing to be part of another.”[[6]](#endnote-6) Your posthumous survival is much easier to understand if the passing into the afterlife just involved you, a soul, ceasing to be in a certain causal relationship with what was your body, whose parts were never your parts.

We stressed that it is difficult to conceive of how material beings can think. However, it is not easy comprehending how an immaterial (partless) entity produces complex thoughts or any thoughts. We typically assume that the more complex the thought, the more complex the thinking organ must be - hence the differences between bird brains and human brains. But defenders of the soul respond that there is nothing to explain because the soul is simple, partless.[[7]](#endnote-7) Its nature is to think just as the simple (partless) electron’s nature is to have a negative charge. When an entity is simple it has no parts that would enter into an explanation of how it does what it does.

But mysteries still abound even on the pure dualist account. How does your soul think without the support of the brain? Thought certainly seems *dependent* upon the brain even if it is the soul and not the brain that is the thinking person, i.e., the subject of thought. Injuring the brain can bring about a state of unconsciousness, not a person still remaining conscious who is just unable to use a damaged brain to move her body or receive sensations. Most soul theorists today believe the soul is dependent upon the brain, roughly akin to the lightbulb and the socket.[[8]](#endnote-8) That explains why damage to the brain impairs our thought despite the soul being the subject of thought. However, even if the soul can think when its ties to the brain are compromised, how does the detached soul communicate with other souls? Would you not be a lonely soul?[[9]](#endnote-9) So the problem isn’t just the traditional interactionist puzzle of how the immaterial and nonextended soul causally interacts with the extended and material brain, but how does one soul in the afterlife communicate with other souls. It would seem that we must rely upon God to causally connect you to other souls, including Himself.[[10]](#endnote-10) Therefore, the possibility of an afterlife seems no more plausible than the existence of God.

**III. Lockean Persons and the Afterlife**

The prospect of our soul surviving without our idiosyncratic psychology of memories, desires, and beliefs may seem hardly any more attractive than existing posthumously as a corpse. Imagine that we lose our memories due to dementia and then death occurs. Our posthumous soul may be capable of thought but any thoughts then would have little to do with our ante-mortem thoughts, none of which it could recollect. A good number of people would not think that they survive if all their memories and desires were lost; and many more would not care for such a future, even if it was theirs, as it would involve them acquiring completely new memories, desires, intentions, and beliefs. Furthermore, the traditional religious conception of an afterlife is tied to the idea of a final judgment, rewards for the virtuous and punishment for the evil. If the person in the afterlife had no psychological connections to their ante-mortem self, rewards and punishments would seem unjust.

Locke famously claimed that “person” is a forensic notion. Persons are entities that are accountable for their past actions and thus must be self-conscious. They have to remember the past to be identical to the person who lived at that time and to be responsible for his earlier deeds. So Locke conjectured that persons extend as far back in time as their psychology extends. If they can’t remember an event, then that event didn’t happen to them. Locke claimed that if Socrates when awake couldn’t remember his dreams than that wouldn’t be him dreaming but someone else he called “Sleeping Socrates.”[[11]](#endnote-11)

Unlike Plato and Descartes, Locke distinguished persons from souls. The same thinking soul could support different persons so you and your psychology could switch souls. A different soul could come to support your consciousness which consists of your beliefs, memories, desires etc. Locke trusted that God would ensure that your person would be paired with your soul in the afterlife, so a different soul would not be punished for what you did. Leibniz believed that God was also needed to posthumously restore people’s lost mental states “so consequently they will always know what they are, otherwise, they not be susceptible of reward or punishment.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

**IV. Transhumanist Persons and an Atheistic Afterlife**

Locke thought it likely that the person’s thought was sustained by an immaterial thinking soul but he left it open that it could be a material substance involved with the production of the person’s mental life. Most modern Neo-Lockeans believe persons to be material beings i.e., composed only of material parts. They also differ from Locke in that they distinguish the person from an underlying thinking substance which thus avoids the problematic consequence of Locke positing there were two thinkers (the soul and the person) when we want there to be just one. The soul/person relationship is quite obscure. However, the modern day neo-Lockean materialist does distinguish persons from their animal. They insist that if you switch your cerebrum with someone else’s, then you would have switched bodies, leaving your original animal behind. What they take to be crucial for your persistence and location is that your psychology continue, and they assume that the cerebrum is responsible for that.

Body switching gives rise to the possibility that an afterlife would not require God, just a replacement for your dead body. Transhumanists hope for a Godless afterlife.[[13]](#endnote-13) It may be that our psychology can be sustained by an inorganic or better organic body when our body dies. This is, in principle, quite plausible. If we are naturally undergoing replacement of our brain’s organic matter over time but still persist because our psychology is *functionally* unchanged by the turnover in matter, why couldn’t we undergo replacements of our organic matter with sturdier inorganic matter that leaves our psychology (functionally) unchanged? This new body would, even if it not immortal, last far longer than our organic body.

Our transplantation into a new organic body or our body being transformed into a bionic one would involve us truly dying in the process and thus we literally would survive our deaths and partake of an afterlife. We would strictly die in the two scenarios because we cease to instantiate life processes that are necessary for the bodily integration characteristic of life. So even if we are not identical to a living body, if we persons have a body that is alive with bodily parts involved in metabolism and homeostasis, then we can die when we cease to possess a living body. That would occur when we are reduced to the size of our cerebrum (an organ, not an organism) or have our organic parts replaced with inorganic ones. In both cases we no longer instantiate (bodily) life processes. What else could it be to die than to cease to be involved in the processes constitutive of life? But we would not cease to exist if our thought continues to be realized in an inorganic brain or transplanted cerebrum.

Since persons are neither souls nor bodies on the Lockean account, this leads to puzzles about the relationship of the human person to their human animal bodies. Persons can’t be the same as their bodies for they can leave them behind when transplanted. But living persons are atom for atom the same as their animal or inorganic body. They share an organic brain. So the conundrum is why can’t the animal think if the person can think? This leads to two thinkers where we would like there to be just one. Metaphysical puzzles abound. We suspect they are sufficient to render the possibility of a Godless afterlife as conceived by Lockean-inspired transhumanists to be untenable. First, why are two physically indistinguishable beings (persons and animals) members of different kinds? What could make one a person that is essentially a psychological being and not a living being, while the other physically indistinguishable entity is essentially a living animal that has its psychological traits just contingently? In other words, why can animals survive the loss of their mental life with the onset of a PVS but persons cannot when they are atom for atom the same? A second puzzle is how would the person know whether she is the person rather than the animal?[[14]](#endnote-14) Any evidence that she has to think she is the person, the animal would have as well. So she has no reason to think that she is not the animal who is mistaken in believing herself to be a person. Finally, the co-located animal and person may not even have the same interests and therefore both couldn’t autonomously agree to the replacement of their body. It would be a premature death for the animal to obtain an inorganic body but would be a way for the person to survive much longer. These problems go away if the human person is identical to the human animal rather than distinct and sharing parts.

**Material Animals and the Afterlife**

A rival of Lockean approaches to personal identity is animalism which identifies human persons and human animals. They are not two distinct but overlapping thinking entities, but one and the same entity referred to with different terms. Human persons are animals with certain sophisticated psychological abilities such as self-consciousness or rationality. That animal existed before it acquired personhood and could exist after it is lost and lapses into an irreversible coma. No new entity came into existence with the onset of any kind of mental life, the animal just became a thinking person. Being a person is like being a student. You may be identical to a student but you are not essentially a student. You can cease to be a student without going out of existence. Likewise one can cease to be a person without going out of existence. Animals go out of existence when they die or alternatively, when their corpse undergoes too much decomposition.

If one is essentially an animal, then one is essentially a body. If one is essentially a *living* animal, then one exists only when one is alive. So how could one survive death? We have said the animal goes out of existence at death - or sometime afterwards with too much decomposition. To avoid having to determine which is our end, imagine that you die in an explosion that leaves not a corpse but scattered remains.

You might think that God could just put you back together. Peter van Inwagen disagrees.[[15]](#endnote-15) What God would do by reassembling your parts is make a duplicate of you who might mistakenly think he is you. To help see why, imagine that a child’s sand castle is destroyed by an ocean wave and her parents put it back together. Would that be the original sandcastle? It seems not to be the original because the parts (grains of sand) are not where they are because the child put them there but because the parents did. So by analogy, it may be that even God can’t reassemble the same organism that dies and decays by configuring the very same atomic parts in the manner that they were before death, but would instead have brought into existence a duplicate. The parts are not where they are because of earlier life processes. They fail to be “immanently caused,” that is, the later parts of the reassembled human animal body are not where they due to the causal powers of their body’s previous biological states. They are where they are because of God’s intentions and interventions. This renders the person a duplicate of the deceased, just as the reassembled sand castle is a duplicate and not the original restored to existence.

Van Inwagen is a materialist about human beings, but a Christian. His solution to how the human animal gets to Heaven (or Hell) involves God whisking away and preserving the freshly dead corpse and replacing it with a duplicate. So we don’t bury Grandma’s body, only have the illusion of doing so. This metaphysical solution has led God to be described as a “body snatcher” [[16]](#endnote-16)and the suggestion that he is engaged in deception, a trait not typically associated with a morally perfect divine being.[[17]](#endnote-17)

Unlike others, we aren’t *morally* troubled by van Inwagen’s solution, just skeptical of the metaphysics. Since deception has to be intentional, we don’t think God’s “body snatching” meets that standard. If van Inwagen is correct, then Grandma’s body can’t be reassembled and Grandma so restored to life, but she still exists later in Heaven or Hell. So Grandma can’t be in the grave. It is our metaphysical ignorance, not God’s deception that prevents us from realizing that it can’t be Grandma or her corpse that we bury. In fact, it seems morally worse to whisk away Grandma’s fresh corpse without a replacement. We would never be sure that Grandma had died rather than is alive and missing. A faux corpse enables us to begin the grieving process.

Our concern with van Inwagen’s solution is actually metaphysical rather than moral. If death involves the loss of the life processes that produce the biological integration constitutive of life, then even a fresh corpse may have to be reassembled (somewhat) for its parts to instantiate life. But reassembly involves a duplicate, not the original person. So our worry is that the body snatching either occurs too early or too late. If life processes have stopped but can be restarted, the person God has taken away is not dead. But resurrection is of the dead according to the Nicene Creed. If the person is dead, then the bodily integration constitutive of life has been lost and resurrection would really be the creation of a living duplicate, not the restoration of life.

Given the problems plaguing van Inwagen’s account, one might want to explore the reassembly version. There are plenty of artifacts designed for disassembly and reassembly – tools, guns, musical instruments etc. Maybe organisms are more like them than our sand castle. Moreover, consider that it doesn’t seem important where our matter was before it first became arranged as zygote. It could have been scattered in an egg and a sperm or just contained in test tube in a lab. As long as that matter came together in the zygotic form, that would be our origins. Perhaps the same is true for the resurrection. As long as the matter at our restoration was the roughly the same and arranged similarly to the matter right before our death, then that would be us even in the absence of immanent causation.[[18]](#endnote-18)

However, the problem that would remain involves the possibility that the parts of the buried end up back in the food chain and someone in the future is composed at their death of the same parts in the same configuration as someone who died much earlier. Who would then be resurrected by reassembly of those parts? Would the last to die with the parts be the first reassembled and when his parts are metabolically removed, the other person is resurrected? But what would account for this time indexing? Even if God could prevent the parts of the deceased from composing a duplicate later, the mere possibility of this suggests that there is something missing the reassembly conception of personal identity. Could there be a non-qualitative identity property, a so-called haecceity or thisness, that each of us has which would make us identical to ourselves and distinct from our physical duplicate? Could God command one reassembled body to have that property and then when the parts were metabolically replaced, they were reassembled instantiating a different haecceity? Such properties are quite odd and their existence is philosophically contentious.

**IV. Hylomorphic Animals and the Afterlife**:

Van Inwagen’s soulless animalism is not the only version of animalism. He favors a type of animalism that has been called “Latter Day Animalism” because Aristotle and Aquinas were the “Original Animalists”.[[19]](#endnote-19) The Original Animalists believed we were essentially animals, but differ with the latter day animalist in that the former thought we were essentially rational. So we have essentially both psychological (rationality) and animal (living) properties. That makes the account a hybrid view.

The original animalists also assumed a soul or form was responsible for configuring our matter in such as way that the result was a rational animal. This hylomorphic soul is very different from the souls conceived of by Plato and Descartes, who are best interpreted as pure dualists. They understood the soul to be the person. The person is literally their mind, an immaterial thinking substance that could exist apart from the body. The person or soul is causally related to a distinct substance, the body. The body is not literally a part of the person. Hylomorphism, on the contrary, doesn’t consider us to be our soul. Rather, our soul is the crucial component of us that is responsible for configuring the matter that results in us being both an animal and a rational one. The human person is the rational animal or living rational body. “Human Person,” “Human Being,” “Rational Animal,” and “Human Body” all refer to one and the same entity with which you are identical. So you have a soul and a mind but they are distinct from each other and from you.

Unlike Cartesian and other soul theories, hylomorphism can easily explain the need for resurrection as you are not your soul but the result of the soul configuring matter. So the view fits well with Christian doctrine where Cartesian souls seem to not provide a rationale for the resurrection. Another attractive aspect of the hylomorphic position is that you did not require the same matter, only the same soul. Any matter configured by your soul would result in your body coming back to life. The soul configured matter ante-mortem and will do so again postmortem. There is no need for the matter to be the same. So the reassembly problems are avoided as the reassembled will be individuated by having the same ante-mortem and post-mortem soul rather than the same matter.

One hylomorphic version of the afterlife shares some of the problems plaguing the conception of the afterlife associated with compound dualism. This strand of hylomorphism, known as “Survivalism,” maintains that you exist after death and prior to the resurrection with your soul as your only part. It is again a sort of ontological double vision to think of yourself as an immaterial being with only a single part that is also immaterial. It is easier to imagine you identical to a soul as in Descartes and Plato. It is also a strange conception of an animal that can exist bodiless between death and resurrection. Defenders of the view think that the detached soul retains the capacity to configure matter into a living body and that suffices for being an animal. But a bodiless animal is a very queer animal.

An alternative view, one which we think can be more rightly ascribed to Aquinas, is that it is your soul but not you that exists between death and resurrection. This view is called “Corruptionism” because the human being’s body or animal has corrupted and thus the human being doesn’t exist in the interim period between death and resurrection. This account has a glaring moral problem and some less obvious metaphysical problems than the survivalist account. The moral problem is that the soul is being punished in Hell or is being painfully reformed in Purgatory for what the the human being did prior to death. The agent then was the human being, not the soul. So it seems unfair. Even if the moral objections to such an afterlife can be explained away, there remain metaphysical puzzles. If the detached soul can think and act posthumously, why couldn’t it do so prior to death? Why wasn’t it an additional thinker, embodied in the human being?

We would prefer a hylomorphism that construes the human being as embodied in the period between death and resurrection.[[20]](#endnote-20) The puzzle then is to explain why there is a need for resurrection if the dead are already embodied in Purgatory. Perhaps Dante’s fanciful descriptions could be of help. The bodily form we need for the purging of Purgatory is different from the mode of body we need when ready to be eternally in God’s presence. That would make the subject posthumously punished the same as the one who did the actions in question. It would also prevent a soul from being an additional thinker, rather than something whose contribution enables the human being to think but is not itself a thinker.

**V. Conclusion**:

We have taken a dim view of a secular afterlife in the Lockean tradition. New organic or inorganic bodies render the relationship between the human being and animal very puzzling and problematic The secular may be better off hoping scientists enable them to continue to avoid death rather than return from it. Pure dualism doesn’t have that problem, but it isn’t easy for us moderns to conceive of ourselves as not being animals but being immaterial beings (without location) causally related to animal bodies. It is not easy to abandon the commonsense view that we are living human beings in virtue of instantiating life processes. However, it doesn’t seem that we can get to an afterlife without God’s assistance. Even if we are animals and future scientists trace and reassemble our matter, Star-Trek style, given the puzzles of reassembly, there is the worry that the result would be a duplicate rather than our animal’s resurrection. However, God may be able to guarantee that our animal is resurrected. So it seems that our hopes in an afterlife will depend upon the existence of a God that will enable us animals, ensouled or not, to live again.

1. We borrow these labels from Eric Olson, A Compound of Two Substances,” in *Soul, Body and Survival*, edited by Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 73-88. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Colin McGinn, “Can We Solve the Mind--Body Problem?” *Mind* 98, no. 391 (July, 1989): 249. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Galen Strawson, “Realistic Monism: Why Physicalism Entails Panpsychism” in *Consciousness and its Place in Nature: Does Physicalism Entail,* ed.Anthony Freeman (Exeter: Imprint Academic, 2006), 3-31. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Alvin Plantinga, “Materialism and Christian Belief” in *Persons: Human and Divine* eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 140. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. William Hasker, “Persons and the Unity of Consciousness” in *The Waning of Materialism*, eds. Robert Koons and George Bealer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 175-190. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Olson, Compound Dualism, 87. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Alvin Plantinga, “Against Materialism” *Faith and Philosophy* 23, no 1 (2006): 3-32. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Richard Swinburne. *The Evolution of the Soul* (Oxford : Oxford University Press, 1986), 310-311. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Jaegwon Kim. “Lonely Souls” in *Soul, Body and Survival*, ed. Kevin Corcoran (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 30-43. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Soul theorists typically rely upon God for the soul’s creation. And even the emergent dualists who claim that the soul emerges when there is sufficient neurological complexity, still rely upon God’s miraculous intervention to support the soul in the Afterlife after the brain is destroyed. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding* ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975) 342. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Gottfried Leibniz, *Discourses on Metaphysics*. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1953), 61-62) [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. Nick Bostrom “A History of Transhumanist Thought,” *Journal of Evolution and Technology* 14 no. 1 (April 2005): 1-25. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Eric Olson. *The Human Animal: Personal Identity without Psychology*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997)) [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Peter Van Inwagen, “The Possibility of Resurrection” *International Journal of Philosophy of Religion* 9: no. 2 (1978) 121. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Dean Zimmerman, “Materialism and Survival” in *Philosophy of Religion: The Big Questions* ed. Stump, E. and Murray, M. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999) pp. 379-386. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. William Hasker, “Materialism and the Resurrection: Are the Prospects Improving?” *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3, no. 1 (2011), 85 [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. God would then have to save our life from whatever internal conditions would soon kill our resurrected body. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Patrick Toner, “Hylemorphism, Remnant Persons, and Personhood,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 44, no. 1 (2014), 76-96. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Rose Hershenov and David Hershenov. “Purgatory.” In *Handbook of the Afterlife,* Eds Benjamin Matheson and Yujin Nagasawa. (London: Palgrave McMillan, 2017) 215-233. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)