

“Can Berkeley's God Raise the Same Body, Transformed?”

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Abstract

Orthodox Christianity affirms a bodily resurrection of the dead. That is, Christians believe that at some point in the eschatological future, possibly after a period of (conscious or unconscious) disembodied existence, we will once again live and animate our own bodies. However, our bodies will also undergo radical qualitative transformation. This creates a serious problem: how can a body persist across both temporal discontinuity and qualitative transformation? After discussing this problem as it appears in contemporary philosophical literature on the resurrection, I will argue that George Berkeley's immaterialist metaphysics is more successful than either physicalism or dualism in escaping objections to resurrection based on the problem of qualitative transformation. In order to accomplish this, I will first discuss Berkeley's views on the metaphysics of so-called 'ordinary' objects, including human bodies, and then apply this view to the resurrection of the dead, ultimately showing that, for Berkeley, the radical transformation of the body in the resurrection is no more problematic than the case of a straight oar appearing bent when one end is inserted in water.

Orthodox Christianity affirms a bodily resurrection of the dead. That is, Christians believe that at some point in the eschatological future, possibly after a period of (conscious or unconscious) disembodied existence, we will once again live and animate our own bodies. However, our bodies will not be as we remember them. In response to his own rhetorical question, “How are the dead raised? What kind of body will they have when they come?”, St. Paul writes that in burying the bodies of the dead, “you are not sowing the future body, but only a seed ... But God gives it a body as He wants ... [it is] sown a natural body, [but] raised a spiritual body.”¹ This leads to two distinct philosophical problems: (1) the persistence of the body across radical historical discontinuity, and (2) the persistence of the body across radical qualitative transformation. Marc Hight has recently argued that the metaphysics of George

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Berkeley is more successful than competing materialist views in dealing with historical continuity objections to the resurrection.² However, Hight's paper does not address the qualitative transformation problem in any depth.³ This paper will argue that Berkeleian immaterialism is more successful than materialism or dualism in escaping qualitative transformation objections. I will begin by examining the qualitative transformation problem and the difficulties it creates for current materialistic and dualistic theories of bodily resurrection. After this, I will outline Berkeley's phenomenalist metaphysics of material beings and the problems it faces in terms of the persistence. Finally, Berkeley's solution to these problems will be presented and it will be demonstrated that the resurrection of a radically transformed body presents, for Berkeley, no further difficulty than ordinary cases of persistence of objects over time.

Although the historical discontinuity problem has been much discussed,⁴ relatively little attention has been paid to the qualitative transformation problem, perhaps because it appears rather more tractable. After all, the qualitative change from a newborn to an adult is by no means insignificant, yet we have no problem recognizing identity across this transformation. Or, to use a comparison with a venerable history in the Christian tradition, we have no trouble recognizing the identity of a caterpillar with a butterfly.⁵

Nevertheless, qualitative transformation is a problem for a wide variety of metaphysical accounts of this doctrine. The tendency among metaphysical theories of resurrection is to preserve the identity of the body by solving one of the two problems I listed and arguing that the other doesn't matter. Instructive examples are the theories of Peter van Inwagen and David Hershenov.⁶ Van Inwagen's model is sometimes called the 'body snatching' model. The idea is that before your body can decay or be destroyed, God spirits away part or all of it – perhaps just

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an important piece of the central nervous system – replacing it with a simulacrum. The new body is created from this piece. Thus van Inwagen insists on strict historical continuity. By taking this route, van Inwagen can accommodate significant qualitative change: if God preserves a part of the central nervous system, and that is all, then God can rebuild the rest of the body around it in a totally new way and it will still be the same body. However, the change cannot be *too* radical: the rebuilt body must have the same central nervous system, at least in part, and be compatible with said nervous system, and any major changes to the nervous system must take place by biological processes in order to preserve identity. This requires a similar body with similar biology in a world with similar physics, but it permits the body to *look* a lot different, and certainly allows for the repair of any defects it may have had.

Hershenov takes the opposite route: he believes that a body can be disassembled and put back together and remain the same body, as long as it picks up just where it left off. In this way he avoids van Inwagen's 'body snatching.' The present world is what it seems, and corpses are real corpses. However, Hershenov's system requires that the body pick up *exactly where it left off*. He explains this requirement as follows:

The reader should not think that this principle that one can exist again only if one returns as one last existed is ad hoc. The same principle governs the intermittent existence of other entities. A baseball game suspended in the sixth inning due to rain or darkness cannot resume the next day in the second inning. But just as the game can resume in the sixth inning, my intuition is that a person who died when he was eighty could exist again if the parts he had at the last time

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of his existence were reassembled.⁷

Thus Hershenov cannot allow *any* qualitative change whatsoever. We must even be composed of (most of) the very same matter.⁸ Hershenov is forced to deal with objections that arise from this by affirming that after our arrival in the afterlife we are healed and then age backward. If two people share the same matter in vital areas, one must be resurrected first, and the other must wait until the rest of his or her matter is available.⁹ In sum, van Inwagen believes that identity can be preserved in the face of significant qualitative change as long as historical continuity is preserved; Hershenov believes identity can be preserved in the face of historical discontinuity provided there is qualitative identity on each side of the gap. However, neither believes that a body can have historical discontinuity and radical qualitative change over the same time period. Furthermore, the scope of possible qualitative change, even on van Inwagen's view, is limited.¹⁰

Concerning the problems of bodily resurrection, Berkeley advises us as follows:

Take away this *material substance*, about the identity whereof all the dispute is, and mean by *body* what every plain ordinary person means by that word, to wit, that which is immediately seen and felt, which is only a combination of sensible qualities, or ideas: and then their most unanswerable objections come to nothing. (*Principles* 95)

Matter is, as always, the problem. Although this claim is straightforwardly true with

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respect to the historical continuity problem, phenomenalism may seem to make matters worse with respect to the qualitative transformation problem. For instance, suppose that I die of a heart attack. In the moments before my death, I will likely have a number of bodily sensations: chest pain, shortness of breath, etc. If I am near a mirror I might see a change in the color of my skin. Ought not these characteristics to follow me to the afterlife? If they do not, then in what sense is it the same body? To put the question most simply, if the being of a physical object consists in its being perceived, then how can an object survive *any* perceived change at all? In order to evaluate the success of Berkeley's system in accounting for the bodily resurrection of the dead, we must now proceed to examine this problem of persistence across qualitative change in its general form. I will first describe the framework within which a Berkeleian must view this question and show how to deal with everyday cases. It will not be possible in this short time to solve every problem, and our limited knowledge of the nature of 'spiritual' bodies leaves the question of which problems need solving a matter of mere guesswork. However, after outlining the solution to the ordinary cases in the most general terms it will be possible to demonstrate that the radical transformation of the body in the resurrection of the dead need not engender any new problems beyond those already found in less exotic instances of object identity over time.

Some may, at this point, be wondering how we can even attempt to discuss identity conditions for physical objects from within a Berkeleian framework given that Berkeley does not, it is often claimed, believe in physical objects. This common view is, however, incorrect. “I am not,” Berkeley protests, “for changing things into ideas, but rather ideas into things.” (*Dialogues* 244) Contrasting his position with that of the materialist, Berkeley tells us in the

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same passage that “those immediate objects of perception, which according to you, are only appearances of things, I take to be the real things themselves.” Berkeley is very concerned to defend the claim that it is he who believes in perceived objects whereas the materialist, by importing unnecessary metaphysical clutter, ultimately lands in a muddled skepticism about the physical world. “We have first raised a dust, and then complain, we cannot see” (Berkeley, *Principles*, Introduction 3).

It would seem, however, that Berkeley's claim to believe in the objects of immediate perception does not license belief in, for instance, tables, but only belief in round or rectangular regions sharing common color patterns, tangible sensations of smoothness, and so forth. How, then, can Berkeley claim that his views safeguard the reality of the gardener's cherry tree (*Dialogues* 234)? Berkeley's materialist interlocutor raises this objection in the *Dialogues* immediately after the previously quoted discussion of things and ideas. Berkeley responds:

Strictly speaking ... we do not see the same object that we feel; neither is the same object perceived by the microscope, which was by the naked eye. But in case every variation was thought sufficient to constitute a new kind or individual, the endless number or confusion of names would render language impracticable.

Therefore to avoid this as well as other inconveniences which are obvious upon a little thought, men combine together several ideas, apprehended by divers senses, or by the same sense at different times, or in different circumstances, but observed however to have some connexion in Nature either with respect to co-existence or succession; all which they refer to one name, and consider as one thing.

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(*Dialogues* 245)

In other words, a physical object is a collection of actual and hypothetical past, present, and future perceptions of a variety of perceivers which are lawfully conjoined with one another. This helps to shed light on Berkeley's response to a well-known objection to phenomenalism:

in the case of the oar [thought to be crooked when viewed with one end in the water], what he observes by sight is certainly crooked; and so far he is in the right. But if he thence conclude, that upon taking the oar out of the water he shall perceive the same crookedness; or that it would affect his touch, as crooked things are wont to do: in that he is mistaken. (*Dialogues* 238)

The oar, it is said, does not “affect his touch, as crooked *things* are wont to do.” *Things* are collections of perceptions. Why, one wonders, do we affirm that this particular collection of perceptions is 'straight' given that (1) looking straight and feeling straight are two totally different properties bearing no necessary connection to one another, and (2) the group of perceptions forming the oar includes some perceptions that are crooked? The answer has to do with our earlier observation that we group perceptions based on a *lawful* connection between them. Objects are called 'straight' in virtue of the perceptions grouped together to form them. However, straight objects will *always* include some crooked perceptions (remembering that the group contains both actual and hypothetical perceptions). This is because of the laws of optics which specify the behavior of light crossing a boundary between substances of differing refractive

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indices. The lawful connection between the perceptions is such as to specify that this perception *must* be crooked.

It will be helpful, in better understanding this point, to consider just what exactly laws *are* in Berkeley's world. It is Berkeley's view that our perceptions form a language by which God speaks to us.¹¹ At *Principles* 108-110, Berkeley claims that the laws of nature form the *grammar* of this language. Berkeley's theory of sense perception as language is not intended as a figure of speech or loose analogy, but as a literal claim about the nature of the perceived world.¹² Berkeley does not tell us just what the role of physical objects in this language is, but there is one line of speculation which immediately suggests itself. Modern linguists distinguish between 'words' and 'lexemes.' A word is an independent meaningful unit of speech. 'Am,' 'is,' and 'are' are all distinct words. A lexeme is, intuitively, a 'dictionary entry.' We group a variety of words together into a single lexeme based on their having a common definition and filling a conjugation or declension paradigm. 'Am,' 'is,' and 'are' fill the present singular paradigm for the lexeme we call 'to be.' I am, of course, oversimplifying the linguistics here, but this level of detail should be sufficient for present purposes.

We can understand the role of objects as follows: each individual perception is a word, and the objects into which we group our perceptions are lexemes. The perceptual language is significantly more complicated than human languages, and there are an enormous number of positions to fill in each paradigm. Thus, for instance, there is a paradigm position for “bottom 18 inches immersed in water” which, for straight objects longer than 18 inches, specifies that they look crooked. When we group hypothetical perceptions together with the actual perceptions in our mental construction of objects, we are assuming that the rest of the 'conjugation' is 'regular'

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and filling out the portions of the paradigm we're interested in. What we mean by saying the *object* is straight, despite the fact that it *appears* crooked, should now be clear: we mean that the 'base form' or 'root' of the object, if you will, is straight, but the specific 'word' we are looking at happens to be crooked, just as the English word 'man' has an 'a' in the root, although in the plural, 'men,' it becomes an 'e' by ablaut.

To return to the problem of resurrection, it has already been said that there is no problem of historical discontinuity for Berkeley. If the best systematization of the language of sense perception includes 'discontinuous' or 'scattered' objects, this does not create any special difficulty. What then about radical qualitative transformation? Berkeley is at liberty to consider glorification only a new 'tense' or 'case' of the language. If there is, in general, a lawful relationship between perceptions of the 'natural' body and perceptions of the 'spiritual' body, then they can be grouped as a single object. Furthermore, human languages include certain lexemes which are, as we say, 'irregular,' as, for instance, the previously mentioned conjugation of 'to be' in English. By analogy, we should be able to accommodate a different transformation of, for instance, those whose 'natural' bodies are badly deformed. Thus the radical transformation of the body in the resurrection should cause a Berkeleian no more consternation than the apparent bending of an oar inserted in water.

I conclude by considering two objections to the foregoing account. Firstly, some Christian thinkers have thought it quite important that survival of death be *miraculous*,¹³ but Berkeley, it might be objected, has rendered it downright mundane. Secondly, Berkeley's metaphysics seems

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to leave the doctrine of the bodily resurrection, though intact, with very little significance. That is, some might claim that since Berkeley denies that bodies are metaphysically 'deep' objects, he is able to retain the doctrine in name only. To answer these objections in detail would be to leave the realm of metaphysics far behind and venture into church dogmatics, history of theology, and an array of related fields. However, I will attempt briefly to explain why the account given would likely satisfy Berkeley and ought to satisfy other Christians with similar theological commitments.

In answer to the first objection, allow me to simply state that I do not see this idea of miraculousness – or, indeed, any discussion of a distinction between the miraculous and the mundane – in any theological document Berkeley would recognize as normative. As an Anglican, Berkeley was bound to remain consistent with his church's “Thirty-Nine Articles of Religion,” which list the canonical Christian Scriptures and the three ecumenical creeds – the Apostles', the Nicene-Constantinopolitan, and the Athanasian – as doctrinally authoritative. All four of these sources affirm the resurrection of the dead, and all except the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed explicitly teach that it is a bodily resurrection. The Scripture clearly attributes the resurrection to divine *agency*. However, none of these authoritative documents make any mention of the miraculousness of the general resurrection. Whatever the origin of the idea that miraculousness is a fundamental point of the Christian doctrine of bodily resurrection, it is not a source which Berkeley, or his fellow Protestants, is bound to recognize.

To the claim that immaterialism detracts from the significance of the doctrine of bodily resurrection, Berkeley can be expected to respond in much the same way he responded to the claim that immaterialism was inconsistent with the Biblical creation narrative:

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But as for solid corporeal substances, I desire you to shew where Moses makes any mention of them; and if they should be mentioned by him, or any other inspired writer, it would still be incumbent on you to shew those words were not taken in the vulgar acceptation, for things falling under our senses, but in the philosophic acceptation, for matter, or an unknown quiddity, with an absolute existence. (*Dialogues* 251)

In other words, Berkeley would be inclined to argue, the doctrine was never *about* metaphysics in the first place. The critical point of the doctrine is that, contrary to Gnostic teaching, orthodox Christianity affirms that I have an intimate relationship with my body, that I am a union of body and mind, and that all of this is as God intended it. In saying that I am a union of body and mind I, in this context, make no metaphysical claim about the nature of either body or mind, or what is ontologically basic and what is dependent, and this is why I have used the word 'mind' even though most English translations of the New Testament use 'soul.' To be more clear, at the risk of being pedantic, orthodox Christianity is committed to the claim that when, in ordinary discourse, I speak of 'body' or of 'mind' I am speaking meaningfully, and that I may correctly assert, in some sense, of either that which I mean by 'body' or that which I mean by 'mind' that it is I. This, the doctrine of bodily resurrection claims, is not a transient feature of this world, but one which will persist to the after-life. In this way, Berkeley's system is able to preserve the doctrine of bodily resurrection in its original significance while avoiding the odd and *ad hoc* devices to which materialistic and dualistic accounts must frequently resort.¹⁴

- 1 1 Corinthians 15:35, 37-38, 44, *The Holman Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, Tennessee: Holman Bible Publishers, 1999).
- 2 Marc A. Hight, "Berkeley and Bodily Resurrection", *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 45 (2007): 443-458.
- 3 There is, however, a very brief discussion at *ibid.* 454.
- 4 Perhaps the most important in the contemporary philosophical literature are three papers originally presented in a session at the 1977 Western Division APA meeting. These papers are, in order: George Mavrodes, "The Life Everlasting and the Bodily Criterion of Identity," *Nous* 11 (1977): 27-39; Philip Quinn, "Personal Identity, Bodily Continuity, and Resurrection," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978): 101-113; and Peter van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (1978): 114-121.
- 5 Hight (*op. cit.*, esp. p. 13) uses this exact analogy, which he draws from Berkeley's *Alciphron* sect. 6.9, in his brief discussion in support of the claim that Berkeley's system has room for radical qualitative transformation. Berkeley's use of the analogy is simply to promote the idea that the doctrine of resurrection has some plausibility in terms of how we observe God to work in the natural world. Hight calls this the "natural analogy argument."
- 6 Van Inwagen, *op. cit.*; David B. Hershenov, "The Metaphysical Problem of Intermittent Existence and the Possibility of Resurrection," *Faith and Philosophy* 20 (2003): 24-36.
- 7 Hershenov, *op. cit.* 31.
- 8 It should be noted that, given the nature of matter in the actual world, this requirement may not even be coherent, because certain quantum mechanical principles lead to the result that it is often in principle impossible to trace the identity of particles over time. Thus, barring the introduction of particle haecceities, there may not be any such thing as 'the same matter' for God to reassemble.
- 9 *Ibid.* 34.
- 10 For reasons of space, I have omitted discussion of a very interesting account of the resurrection which is due to Dean Zimmerman ("The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The 'Falling Elevator' Model," *Faith and Philosophy* 16 (1999): 194-212). Zimmerman's account falls in between those of van Inwagen and Hershenov in terms of its approaches to the two problems I have outlined. Hershenov has argued that Zimmerman's account is metaphysically impossible because it violates certain principles related to part assimilation. See "Van Inwagen, Zimmerman, and the Materialist Conception of Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 38 (2002): 451-469.
- 11 For a detailed discussion of Berkeley's theory of sense perception as language, see Kenneth L. Pearce, "The Semantics of Sense Perception in Berkeley," *Religious Studies* 44 (2008): 249-268, esp. pp. 249-257.
- 12 See Walter E. Creery, "Berkeley's Argument for a Divine Visual Language," *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 3 (1972): 212.
- 13 In the recent philosophical literature, this is listed as a major criterion by, for instance, Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 333-348, esp. pp. 333 and 340; Hight, however, sees the importance of miracle as limited to the particular case of the resurrection of Christ, and regards the naturalization of the general resurrection, which Berkeley attempts through the 'natural analogy' argument which is a primary subject of Hight's paper, although presumably impossible, as not only theologically permissible, but desirable (*op. cit.* 444).
- 14 This paper has benefitted from the comments of Sean Greenberg and Brandon Watson, and also from criticisms made to a previous paper on the same subject by James Ross.