Robust Christian Materialism

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1. *Robust* Materialism[[1]](#footnote-1)  
   In 2002, Derk Pereboom published an article titled, “Robust Nonreductive Materialism.” An important aim of the paper is to save nonreductive materialism from the challenge of explanatory exclusion.[[2]](#footnote-2) Pereboom’s strategy is to employ the constitution relation heretofore used as a way of understanding objects of various kinds (e.g. statues, persons) to psychological phenomena in the following way:

The token mental causal powers of M1 and M2 will not be identical with the token

microphysical causal powers of P1 and P2, nor with the token neural causal powers of the

neural states N1 and N2 that constitute M1 and M2, nor with token causal powers at any

other level of description more basic than the neural.[[3]](#footnote-3)

To put things simply, we can understand the relation between the mental and the physical in terms of constitution whereby the mental is not identical to the physical, but constituted by it. (More accurately, Pereboom’s view posits that mental causal powers are constituted by physical causal powers.) And the upshot is that the mental gets its causal efficacy in virtue of being tied (by constitution) to the physical so as to render it a nonredundant cause (and therefore not a candidate for exclusion). It’s a novel and puzzling suggestion, but it is not the aim of this paper to assess the merits of applying the constitution strategy to the exclusion problem. Rather, my interest is with the suggestion that a *robust* materialism (nonreductive though Pereboom’s is) importantly involves fleshing out the relation between psychological tokens and their neural correlates in a sufficiently tight way. Pereboom says, “Robust nonreductive materialism, as I conceive it, is a view about specifically psychological explanations, states, and causal powers…Each of [which] will be wholly constituted of microphysical events.”[[4]](#footnote-4) Because Pereboom advocates for nonreduction, identity is off the table. But he nevertheless characterizes the relation between the mental and the physical (or, rather, between their respective causal powers) as one in which the causal powers of the former are *wholly* constituted by the causal powers of the latter. This suggests a rather strong materialism.[[5]](#footnote-5) Whether or not we endorse so strong a version of materialism (or a stronger one still), we see modeled in Pereboom’s strategy a commitment to a physicalist approach to the mind which posits a tight link between mental (states, events) and physical (states, events). This importantly involves more than the mere denial of substance dualism (i.e., that human persons are at least partly composed of an immaterial soul), but also emphasizes the primacy of the physical. According to Jaegwon Kim,

“[physicalism] is a doctrine that affirms the priority or basicness of what is physical.”[[6]](#footnote-6) As applied to the human person, then, physicalism affirms the priority or basicness of that upon which the mental depends – i.e., the brain and its various goings on (neural events and chemical processes).[[7]](#footnote-7)

Christian Materialists have tended (though not without exception, as we’ll see) to focus on non-dualistic understandings of the human person. And in so doing, they uphold a central tenet of materialism (i.e. the rejection of the claim that you and I are composed, even in part, by an immaterial substance). There are a number of considerations which motivate their doing so. Some take it that scripture and/or Christian orthodoxy are friendlier to a materialist view of persons (e.g. Murphy, Baker, Merricks). Others are prompted by general metaphysical concerns about the nature of things like objects and organisms (e.g. van Inwagen, Baker). Still others may be suspicious about the prospects for dualism. All of this has prompted an interesting and lively debate, but it arguably misses the mark for one who is drawn to materialism for reasons, likely among others, having to do with the empirical data linking the mental with the physical in an apparently comprehensive way. Indeed, when we look outside of Christian circles to the broader discipline we find that, perhaps excepting the suspicion regarding dualism, the reasons motivating Christian materialists do not generally reflect those prompting the majority of philosophers to be physicalists of one kind or other. Indeed, the explanation of this latter fact seems to rest with information emerging from the empirical sciences.

Brain science tells us that there is a high degree of correlation between mental phenomena (beliefs, desires, perceptions, sensations, intentions, and so on) and brain phenomena (neural events, chemical processes, and the like). Indeed, in many cases brain science can tell us which mental states (or events) correlate with which brain states (or events). Couple this with the fact that additional discoveries are being made at an accelerated pace and it seems natural to suppose that we can eventually, with time, come to have an exhaustive list of such correlations. In other words, the empirical data makes reasonable the belief that for every mental state *M*, there is a physical correlate, *P*. Of course, this acknowledgment alone doesn’t secure physicalism over dualism, as an exhaustive list of the correlations won’t by itself reveal precisely how the mind relates to the brain. But additional facts regarding the apparent causal connections between the two may bolster the case. For example, we know that if we increase certain chemicals in the brain (e.g. serotonin), it will affect the subject’s mood. And we know that damage to certain regions of the brain will result in memory loss, or impairment of speech. Assuming we take such examples to involve genuine instantiations of causation (which I take to involve real relations that are themselves inexorable features of the world), then the direction of the causal arrow (from the physical to the mental) suggests a sort of priority or fundamentality of the physical. And it further suggests a relationship between the two which is properly fleshed out in terms of a type of *dependence* of the mental on the physical.

For example, Donald Davidson puts it this way:

Mental characteristics are in some sense dependent, or supervenient, on physical

characteristics. Such supervenience might be taken to mean that there cannot be two

events alike in all physical respects but differing in some mental respects, or that an

object cannot alter in some mental respects without altering in some physical respects.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Now, there are multiple ways to understand the kind of dependence one might be suggesting when one invokes supervenience. Indeed, Jaegwon Kim maintains that there are two notions of supervenience at work in the Davidson quote above. For our present purposes, it will suffice to understand psychophysical supervenience in the way suggested by the popular slogan: “no mental difference without a physical difference.” That is, two individuals that are in every way alike physically must be in every way alike mentally. Kim suggests that a question about the truth of mind/body supervenience is essentially a question about the truth of physicalism.[[9]](#footnote-9)

If you don’t like the use of supervenience here, then we might opt instead to characterize the tight link between the mental and the physical in some other way; perhaps in terms of *realization* where every mental state/event is realized by some physical state/event.[[10]](#footnote-10) That may be better; it may be worse.[[11]](#footnote-11) In any case, I don’t intend to carve out a particular account of physicalism. But I do wish to capture some of the key motivations for one’s adopting physicalism (in whatever form one prefers). And at least one important physicalist commitment is, it seems to me, that the mental and the physical enjoy a very tight relationship, and that the relation is, as dependence relations in general are, one-directional. The mental is in some strong sense dependent on the physical. Once we are convinced of this, it should translate to our thinking about the nature of human persons more generally.

1. *Christian* Materialism

Christian materialism is like any other materialism. That is, I do not, by my title, intend to suggest that there is a unique species of materialism that is particular to Christians. What is distinctive to the Christian materialist is that she bears a burden her non-Christian counterpart does not bear. She must make her view consistent with the various tenets of Christian doctrine and some of these tenets may not appear to be especially congenial to materialism. In particular, the doctrinal commitment to a continued (or renewed, as the case may be) existence of one and the same individual post mortem might be thought to pose a significant challenge for one who believes that human persons are material things. If person *P* is a material thing and *P* exists across some temporal duration, say, from *t* to *t85*, then a material thing exists from *t* to *t85*.[[12]](#footnote-12) And if we grant, as I think we should, that if an object or substance is material, it is essentially material (i.e., it cannot suddenly or eventually come to be immaterial), then at any moment at which I exist, I will be a material thing.[[13]](#footnote-13) But as we know, death marks the cessation of the body’s functions and the corpse is then left to decay or be burned, or to meet with some other form of destruction. How, then, can it be that I survive this episode if I am precisely the sort of thing to which such inevitable misfortunes befall, being as I am a material thing (i.e. this body)? Or if I do not survive, how can it be that I once again come to exist though death has brought about my extinction?

One story, familiar in part because of its longevity, is as follows. Upon death, bodies deteriorate and over time are eventually (and sometimes rather quickly) reduced to a heap of sub-organic matter. Resurrection, then, is the divine act whereby God reassembles the decomposed bits that once constituted John Wesley, say, so as to bring it about that Wesley exists once more. That is, the reassembled bits compose an object and that object is supposed to be identical with Wesley’s pre-mortem body. The problem, according to van Inwagen (and Locke before him), is that this supposition is wrong. The object which results from the reassembly cannot be the very object that was Wesley’s body before death since that would imply that a single object has multiple beginnings. Suppose a library claims to have in its possession a certain manuscript – Aquinas’ *Summa,* say, written in St. Thomas’ own hand. Suppose further that the library claims that this manuscript was burned in the year 1506, but that God miraculously recreated it in 1507. As van Inwagen points out, the scenario sounds quite impossible. God, being omnipotent, could no doubt create an exact duplicate of the original manuscript, but the divinely created manuscript would not be identical to the original. After all, its earliest moment of existence would have been after Aquinas’ death and so it could not have been written by Aquinas. The two manuscripts have distinct causal histories. One (the original) was brought about by Aquinas. The other (the duplicate) was brought about by God. As such, there is not one manuscript, but two.

While I agree with van Inwagen on this point, I will remain intentionally neutral about the possibility of “gappy” existence (i.e., an object’s existing across a temporal gap) for the remainder of this paper. In any case, the sort of gap described here is not the sort of temporal gap some claim is innocuous. Rather, it seems especially problematic since there appear to be no causal connections between the body at death and the resurrected body. The possibility of a material object’s traversing such a gap violates a (plausible) requirement that subsequent stages of an object be immanent-causally connected to immediately preceding stages. For any enduring object *O,* its object-stage *O2*at *t2* is *immanent-causally connected* to its preceding object-stage *O1* at *t1* iff the intrinsic state of *O1* at *t1* is (at least) a partial cause of the state of *O2* at *t2*. Since immanent causation is something that obtains between stages of objects, some have argued that the requirement can be satisfied even on the assumption that objects can survive temporal gaps.[[14]](#footnote-14) But I will not address the matter here. After all, however one feels about the possibility of persistence across gaps, the reassembly view is problematic for other reasons.

Suppose a cannibal dines on your flesh and some of the atoms that once made up your body now make up his. And suppose that the cannibal immediately dies. When God sets to the task of reassembling, how can he reassemble both you and the cannibal when the particular atoms in question have two claimants? Notice that the problem can be posed without introducing cannibalism. Upon a person’s death, the atoms that composed her will immediately or eventually come to (at least partly) compose other items in the universe including, sometimes, other people. In the event that they do come to compose another person, God cannot resurrect both the original person (P1) and the person with the more recent claim to those atoms (P2) since certain atoms will have been shared by both P1 and P2. This could happen in some less uncommon way if, for example, your organs are donated and transplanted into the body of another person. If resurrection requires reassembling all of one’s material bits, then God will have to choose between P1 and P2 . What’s more, bodies are gaining and losing bits of matter all the time so that the atoms which now compose me are altogether distinct from those that composed, say, my ten-year-old body. On this view, God could in principle resurrect both me and my ten-year-old self by reassembling each set of atoms. As van Inwagen points out, once resurrected, I could turn to my ten-year-old self, and she to me, and both of us could correctly say to the other, “I am you.”[[15]](#footnote-15)

1. (Mere) Nondualism

Certain more recent attempts to defend the possibility of resurrection given materialism flow out of a general nondualistic view about human persons as things that bear some important (nonidentity) relation to their bodies. For Lynne Rudder Baker, that relation is constitution. For Timothy O’Connor and Jonathan Jacobs, it is emergence. I will take these in turn.

III.a. Constitution and Divine Fiat

According to Baker’s Constitution View, human persons are not identical to their bodies (or to part of their bodies), but are instead constituted by their bodies. Baker’s view is materialistic in so far as she claims that human persons are necessarily embodied. But it is not true, on her view, that they must have the body they in fact have. After all, a human being is a partly psychological kind. To be *human* is to be constituted by a human body. To be a *person* (whether human or otherwise) is to have a “first-person perspective” (i.e., to think about oneself as oneself and to identify one’s thoughts as one’s own). The requirement here is not merely that persons be conscious since a being can be conscious while lacking a first-person perspective. Such may be the case for non-human primates and other higher animals. A person, on the other hand, must be *self-*conscious, viewing herself as the subject of her experiences.

Constitution, importantly, is not identity. Consider a statue and the particular lump of matter which constitutes it. Statue and Lump can be said to differ in certain respects. For example, Lump could exist in a world without art, whereas Statue could not. And Statue could not exist without being a statue, whereas Lump can. Put differently, Statue has a property which Lump lacks, namely, the property of being a statue wherever it exists. Baker contends that because Statue and Lump differ with respect to some of their modal properties, a correct account of their relation will have to be more complicated than simple identity.[[16]](#footnote-16)

On the other hand, Statue and Lump are arguably not just two independent individuals. Many of Statue’s aesthetic properties depend on Lump’s physical properties. And, of course, the two are spatially coincident. Take the particular statue, Michelangelo’s *David.* David, and the piece of marble which constitutes it (call it, “Marble”), have been located at exactly the same places at the same times since (roughly) 1504. And there are other similarities. David and Marble have precisely the same size, weight, color, smell, and so on. And these similarities are no accident. For David does not exist separately from Marble.

There are a number of things that make the constitution view puzzling and these have been well-rehearsed in the literature. Let me mention two. First, Baker claims that constitution is pervasive: “pieces of paper constitute dollar bills, strands of DNA constitute genes, pieces of cloth constitute flags, bits of bronze constitute statues.”[[17]](#footnote-17) One way in which Baker shores up her non-identity claim is to posit that the piece of paper and the dollar bill have distinct causal powers. For example, when a large stone is placed in certain circumstances it acquires new properties and a new thing (say, a monument to soldiers who died in battle) comes into being. The constituted thing (the monument) has effects in virtue of having properties that the constituting thing (the stone) would not have had if it had not constituted a monument. The monument attracts speakers and crowds on patriotic holidays; it brings tears to people’s eyes; it sparks protests. Had it not constituted a monument, the stone would not have had any of these effects. However, if this is right, it would seem there will be widespread overdetermination of effects since, as O’Connor and Jacobs’ put it, “every socially-based kind (such as currency or works of art) results in a co-located object with new causal powers – the piece of paper and the dollar bill, the lump of clay and the statue.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

Second, there is a question about just what the constitution relation is and whether it is coherent. According to it, we can have, in a single spatio-temporal region, two body-shaped objects that wholly overlap so that when they get on the scale together and it registers 150 pounds, that is the weight of each of them individually and also the weight of them collectively.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Even if these problems are surmountable, our interest is with Baker’s claim that the constitution view offers an account of the resurrection which “fares better than its competitors.”[[20]](#footnote-20) Remember that for Baker, John Wesley is constituted by his body, but is not identical to it. So, while it is true that Wesley must be embodied at any time that he exists (here or in the hereafter), his post-mortem self needn’t have his pre-mortem body (indeed, Baker imposes no causal constraint here, so presumably the post-mortem body could be distinct and discontinuous with the pre-mortem body). What must be the case, however, is that Wesley’s first-person perspective comes to be realized in a glorified body. How does this come about? Baker says, “All that is needed is God’s free decree that brings about one contingent state of affairs rather than another. If God decrees that the person with body 1have [Wesley’s] first-person perspective, then [Wesley] is the person with body 1.[[21]](#footnote-21)

From a materialistic perspective, this is an unsatisfying move. The materialist, I’ve suggested, is motivated by a scientific picture of the human person. In particular, she believes that one’s mental life depends in some rather strong way on one’s physiology (leaving open whether the dependence in question is to be spelled out in reductive or nonreductive terms). This will naturally lead, I think, to a view of the human person as dependent upon (for existence as well as continued persistence) on the existence of a single (and particular), continuous physical item (namely, her body). One’s body is not accidental to one. Baker’s materialism imposes the very weak requirement that I need merely be embodied. So, while my mental life is contingently connected to the body that now constitutes me, it could just as well be connected to some other altogether different body.[[22]](#footnote-22) The persistence of my body plays no role (indeed is not a relevant consideration) in whether or not I persist. This is at best “materialism light” and at worst “materialism in name only.” Material continuity (i.e., sameness of material stuff) must, it seems to be, be a requirement for the persistence of any object that is (even partly) a *material* object.

There is more to say. Once divine fiat is brought to bear, we see that the various examples of constitution we were given to motivate and articulate the theory (statues and lumps, for example) are importantly disanalogous from the persons case. Imagine that one evening, a group of deviant but talented art students break into Florence’s Accademia Art Gallery and remove *David.* In its place, they leave a fake which is in every way indistinguishable from the original. Indeed, let’s suppose it is even crafted out of the same kind of Carrara marble of which the original is fashioned. Come the next day when the crowds gather once again, this time around the new statue, whatever emotions, thoughts, and behaviors are sparked in these onlookers by the new statue are precisely, I think we can suppose, of the sort that would have been sparked by David. And yet, the new statue clearly is not David. It is a fake (a mere duplicate). Are we to suppose that divine fiat can change matters in this case – that, by virtue of simply willing that the new marble realize the various statue-properties of the original David, God can make it the case that the crowds now gathered are peering at David? This strikes me as flatly impossible. But this is precisely what Baker alleges God can do in resurrecting Wesley.

III.b. Emergent Individuals

O’Connor and Jacobs argue that their view of persons as “emergent individuals” affords a materialist account of resurrection. On this view, a person (e.g. Wesley) is essentially a composite of his particular *thisness* (a “non-qualitative aspect necessarily unique to him,”) and some distinctive, emergent features. [[23]](#footnote-23) Wesley’s thisness is a primitive, not deriving from the particularity of his parts since the latter are presumably always changing. Now, the emergent individual view is not substance dualism because the composite, which is Wesley, is not independent from, or dual to, the body which composes it.

This is applied to the resurrection of Wesley in the following way. We are asked to imagine that there is a latent tendency of the features of the constituents of Wesley’s body and his emergent-level features to jointly generate a duplicating state in certain contexts. The divine act of resurrecting Wesley consists in God’s triggering the relevant disposition so as to bring about the duplication. Each duplicate is immanent-causally connected with the original Wesley. While the earthly body is constituted by the matter that only a moment earlier constituted Wesley, it is not Wesley since it lacks “the unity-conferring emergent features essential to him.”[[24]](#footnote-24) The resurrection body retains these features and so is Wesley. That is, where the substance dualist would claim that Wesley goes where his soul goes, the current proposal suggests that (to put it perhaps a bit crudely) Wesley goes where his thisness goes, remembering, of course, that any future Wesley must be immanent-causally connected at the underlying level and not just at the emergent level.

The problem is that on the emergent individual account, while it will be the case that the resurrected Wesley (call him Wesley 2) is (indeed, must be) immanent-causally connected to the pre-mortem Wesley (call him Wesley 1) at the underlying level (in addition to the emergent level), it is not necessary that any of the material which constituted Wesley 1 be preserved so as to constitute Wesley 2 (whether that be only an instant later or a good while later (as in the case of immediate or general resurrection, respectively). So, while O’Connor and Jacob’s view requires that there be the right sort of causal connection between that which constitutes Wesley 1 and that which constitutes Wesley 2, their view allows for an otherwise complete replacement of the underlying material constituting Wesley from one stage to the next.

Now, to be clear, the causal connection required by the emergent individual view is one of *immanent* causality which implies that the new material (whatever it may be) which constitutes Wesley 2 cannot simply be created *ex nihilo* by God, but must in some way be produced or generated by that which constitutes Wesley 1. However, we are imagining that Wesley’s underlying and emergent features have a rather remarkable tendency to duplicate which, it may be of interest to note, implies that the causation involved her is such as to potentially allow for rather wild results. In other words, whatever the nature of the causation involved, it would seem to allow for effects which differ in rather dramatic ways from their causes given that we’re supposing that emergent composites might be capable of spawning duplicates – at least one of which may be materially quite dissimilar from the original.

What O’Connor and Jacobs’ view fails to ensure is a continuity (in fact a continuation) of (at least some of the) underlying matter between Wesley in his pre-mortem state and the very same individual in his post-mortem state. Now, that’s not to say that Wesley is identical with a certain underlying physical collection. After all, the particles that make up a body are exchanged over time. But a sufficiently robust materialism – according to which I am essentially *this* body – must maintain that thisbody is preserved. This plausibly requires that an exhaustive replacement of underlying physical stuff be gradual; very minimally that conjoining stages of a thing not be altogether dissimilar as regards their physical properties. I am not convinced that the obtaining of immanent-causal connections will suffice for sameness of material stuff (a job it seems charged with performing on the emergent individual view).[[25]](#footnote-25)

In O’Connor and Jacobs’ words, Wesley’s individuality “must be somehow intimately bound up with there being some (organized) particles or other which sustain it.”[[26]](#footnote-26) But this, it seems to me, fails to capture what it is about *this* organization of particles (or in any case, the organization which changes, via certain causal processes over time in the requisite gradual manner) – the one that presently composes me – that makes *it* unique to me. On the emergent individual view, my thisness may be necessarily tied to my physical make-up (at the start), but once the composite individual emerges, it need only be constituted by some immanent-causally connected physical bits or other.[[27]](#footnote-27)

This suggests that what is essential to me is not a particular persistent physical item (my body), but some other feature. For O’Connor and Jacobs it is a “thisness.” If a materialist is willing to grant their picture, I’m not sure just what would prevent the same materialist from revisiting dualism. Is positing that I am my “thisness” friendlier to materialism than positing that I am my soul? Is it friendlier to a scientific picture of the human mind according to which the correlations between mental phenomena and brain phenomena are as tight as we’ve been supposing? Similarly, for Baker, whether an embodied person counts as me depends on whether it realizes my first-person perspective. And whether it so realizes my first-person perspective is a matter of divine fiat. The upshot is that on neither view is it correct to say of a person *P* that she is identical to a certain material object (her body) since the persistence conditions for *P* are out of step with the persistence conditions for material objects generally. In Baker’s case, I needn’t be constituted by *this* body. And in O’Connor and Jacobs’ case, though the body I have post-resurrection is immanent-causally connected with my pre-mortem body, it can be wholly materially dissimilar to it.

1. Materialist, and Still Crazy (After All These Years)

Consider, by way of contrast, Peter van Inwagen’s materialist resurrection view which posits that (at least some of) the underlying physical stuff that composed the pre-mortem Wesley continues to compose the post-mortem Wesley. As I will argue, this account satisfies the necessary conditions of a materialist account of human persons so as to render a model of resurrection a self-respecting materialist can endorse. Furthermore, it is preferable to Zimmerman’s alternative “Falling-Elevator Model.”

IV.a. The “Body-Snatcher” View

According to van Inwagen’s “just so” story, at a moment just prior to death, God whisks away a person’s body – or more likely, some part of a person’s body – to the afterlife. At the same moment, he replaces the original body with a perfect simulacrum. The result, of course, is that any post-mortem bodies that we encounter are, or in any case contain, a simulacrum. The entire process is perfectly undetectable by human beings and so is consistent with everything we apprehend in our experiences of corpses, including when we perform autopsies or otherwise give them an especially careful look-over. It’s a rather wild story, no doubt, but a nevertheless coherent one. One objection to it has been that it has God engaging in widespread deception and so it violates Descartes’ “no deceiver” axiom.[[28]](#footnote-28) On this basis, Zimmerman suggests that “the Christian materialist would surely do well to look for a better story than this.”[[29]](#footnote-29)

But this strikes me as a bit too quick. After all, van Inwagen has offered a story according to which the very physical part of me that is essential to my being me is preserved and a new (heavenly) body is created around it. This is incredible, no doubt, and it is duly noted that the view implies that God is a body-snatcher who engages in rather widespread deception (since every corpse is – or in any case contains – a simulacrum). Perhaps this should trouble one a good deal. I’m not sure. Surprising as it would be, it’s not terribly difficult to imagine some potentially justifying reason for God to keep us in the dark should it be the case that bits of us go missing upon death (insert your favorite justification for divine hiddenness, perhaps). Or else we might employ another familiar theistic strategy: As we are all aware, when it comes to divine activity, the mysteries abound. You and I may be unaware of what reasons justify God in allowing (for example) the suffering that exists in the world, or the fact that God chooses to keep God’s self hidden. But presumably, it doesn’t follow that there aren’t such justifying reasons. What’s more, it may unreasonable to expect that if there were such reasons, human beings would be privy to them. If these replies are satisfactory in other contexts, then I see no reason why they couldn’t be employed to deflect the charge that such trickery as is involved in concealing from us the fact that bits of us routinely go missing upon death threatens God’s perfect goodness.[[30]](#footnote-30)

There is, however, a more serious objection to van Inwagen’s body-snatcher view. For it is possible, on van Inwagen’s materialism, that John Wesley be fissioned, so that the products of the fissioning are two distinct individuals, *x* and *y*, each of whom is immanent-causally connected with the original Wesley. If both *x* and *y* are living organisms, then Wesley fails to be identical to either one (for neither *x* nor *y* has a better claim to being Wesley than does the other). And, of course, Wesley fails to be both *x* and *y* (for no one thing can become two, on pain of contradiction). Unless one adopts four-dimensionalism, allowing one to claim that there have been two people all along whose parts overlapped for the period of Wesley’s lifetime), one appears forced to claim that upon fissioning, Wesley ceases to be, and two new entities, *x* and *y*, come into existence. The problem, as Zimmerman points out, is that this commits the van Inwagen-style materialist (or any materialist, Zimmerman thinks) to a “closest continuer” theory of personal identity. On that view, whether a person existing from *t1* to *t2* is Wesley depends on facts extrinsic to him throughout the interval. The possibility of fissioning suggests to Zimmerman an alternative materialist account of resurrection for which he feigns endorsement of van Inwagen’s metaphysical commitments.

IV.b. The “Falling Elevator” Model

Immediately prior to death, and perhaps with God’s help, Wesley’s body undergoes an exhaustive replication (more accurately, every particle replicates, immanent-causally resulting in two particle-stages). One of these bodies remains as his corpse, the other jumps through space and time to the afterlife. (Imagine here a scenario akin to what you might see in a cartoon where a person survives the precipitous drop of an elevator toward the basement floor by jumping out at the last minute.) The body which “escapes death” with an impressive spatiotemporal leap is Wesley because, seeing as it is a mere corpse, the body left behind is not a candidate for being Wesley.

The problem, we’ll recall, is that Wesley’s continuing to exist (being successfully resurrected) depends on facts that are extrinsic to him. If there are two organisms, each of which is immanent-causally connected to the living Wesley, Wesley does not persist (since there would be two equally good candidates for Wesley and, of course, both cannot be Wesley). If there is exactly one, he does. In the falling elevator scenario, Wesley satisfies the closest continuer constraint during the interval that contains his passage from this life. To see this, we need merely ask, “Why is it that the body in the afterlife, rather than the body remaining on earth, properly counts as Wesley?” The answer is that, as one of the post-replication bodies is a mere corpse, there remains only one candidate for being Wesley: the living organism in the afterlife. And yet, whether Wesley survives shouldn’t depend, constitutively, on whether a process wholly extrinsic to him (involving the persistence of a distinct individual) takes place.

Van Inwagen agrees that a closest-contninuer theory of personal identity is problematic. Indeed, he says, “it is absurd, it is utterly incoherent, to suppose that [Wesley’s] identity could depend on what might happen to some atoms other than the atoms that compose him.”[[31]](#footnote-31) Interestingly, just a few lines later he imposes the following “unavoidable requirement” for the persistence of human beings: “If I am a material thing, then if a man who lives at some time in the future is to be I, there will have to be some sort of material and causal continuity between this matter that composes me now and the matter that will then compose that man.”[[32]](#footnote-32)

In my view, van Inwagen’s requirement is illuminating. And when we read carefully, we see that the requirement has two components. Dialectically, the emphasis has been on the need for immanent-causal connections. But van Inwagen’s statement suggests that bodily persistence requires material continuity as well. There may not be a precise way to characterize what is required for a body *B1* at time *t1* to be materially continuous with *B2* at *t2*, but, as I’ve been suggesting throughout, a reasonable minimum condition is that *B2*at *t2* not be wholly materially dissimilar to *B1* at *t1.*

This becomes relevant when we consider more carefully the details of Zimmerman’s falling elevator scenario. Zimmerman’s case is notably unlike a Wiggins-style fission in which my brain is divided and each half placed in a new body (so that we are unsure which body, or bodies, contain me, if any do). Instead, employing van Inwagen’s terminology (and granting his general metaphysical picture), Zimmerman describes the scenario this way:

At the moment of my death, God allows each atom to continue to immanently cause later stages in the “life” or history of an atom, right where it is then located, as it normally would do; but…God *also* gives each atom the miraculous power to produce an exact duplicate at a certain distance in space or time (or both), at an unspecified location I shall call ‘the next world.’ The local, normal, immanent-causal process linking each atom to an atom within the corpse is sufficient to secure their identities; no atom ceases to exist merely because it exercised this miraculous “budding” power to produce new matter in a distant location. Still the arrangement of atoms that appears at a distance is directly immanent-causally connected to my body at the time of my death.”[[33]](#footnote-33)

Notice that the atoms do something that Zimmerman says “resembles” fissioning, though they do not divide. Instead, they “bud” new atoms which then “jump” through space-time to compose the resurrected body. The original atoms stay behind as the corpse (and, hence, no body-snatching is required). Since the original atoms compose a mere corpse, Wesley has only one proper claimant: namely, the “ontic-leaping” resurrection body located in the afterlife.[[34]](#footnote-34)

There are a handful of objections to Zimmerman’s model.[[35]](#footnote-35) I will focus on two. First, recall that Zimmerman’s objection to materialist accounts of resurrection is that their advocates are unavoidably committed to a closest-continuer theory of personal identity. His own model (for which he only feigns materialism) is no exception. The body which is produced by the wholesale “budding” of atoms from the original collection is Wesley precisely because the only potential competitor (the corpse which is composed of the original atoms) is not a candidate (since it is merely a corpse). Had the original atoms come to compose a living body, the resurrection body would not be Wesley since Wesley would have two claimants.

Kevin Corcoran argues that God could simply make it the case that no case of fission ever results in the existence of a competitor.[[36]](#footnote-36) This might do if our concern with the closest-continuer account is that it makes Wesley’s survival a matter of mere luck (since his survival depends on the absence of a competitor). If God intends to resurrect Wesley and successfully doing so requires that the body in the afterlife fail to have any viable competitors, then God could arrange for that. But the problem with a closest-continuer theory is not that it makes survival a matter of luck, but that it has the consequence that a particular organism’s being Wesley depends on the nonexistence of any other organism with an equal claim to being Wesley.

Zimmerman thinks the closest-continuer theory is something the materialist should learn to live with. I’m inclined to agree. After all, a materialist might have grounds for doubting whether an organism’s persisting throughout a given interval is *ever* an entirely intrinsic matter since, as Zimmerman puts it, “whether some matter constitutes a thing of a certain kind depends upon whether there is more matter attached to it.”[[37]](#footnote-37) Consider “Baldy” (i.e. the part of my body that does not include my hair). Baldy is not the whole organism since the whole organism includes my hair – or, in any case, the living parts of my hair. However, if it is possible for all of my hair to die while the rest of me remains the same, then something intrinsically exactly like Baldy could be an entire organism. So, some form of a closest-continuer commitment arises in cases involving the simple gaining and losing of parts.

The objection against the falling elevator model that I want to press should now be a familiar one. Recall that the “budding off” process results in a resurrected body that is composed entirely of new material bits. That is, the resurrected body shares no atoms with the original, pre-mortem body. The reason the resurrection body counts as Wesley is because it (like the corpse) is immanent-causally connected with the original and also because there is no viable competitor. But the view allows – indeed posits – that conjoining stages of Wesley are in every way materially dissimilar (i.e., they share no material parts). From one stage to the next – as he “crosses over” – Wesley undergoes an exhaustive replacement of constitutive material bits.

On an ontology that includes persisting objects, objects (like organisms) can lose their parts.[[38]](#footnote-38) When I take my car to the mechanic to have the tires changed, the car loses some of its parts (its tires) and gains new parts (new tires). But objects cannot undergo an immediate, exhaustive replacement of parts. Now, there is disagreement about whether a watch that is thoroughly dismantled at *t1* and later reassembled at *t10*can survive the interval from *t1* to *t10*. Perhaps it can as a scattered object. If it cannot, there is further disagreement about whether *it* can be said to come again to exist (once reassembled) at *t10* since to do so would be for it to enjoy” gappy” existence. But now suppose that, instead of being merely dismantled, my watch is destroyed and its particles scattered about in much the way a body’s are at some time following death. There will again be disagreement about whether, when the parts are miraculously reassembled, the item they form is *my* watch. But all of this is familiar territory by now.

So let’s take things a bit further. Imagine a quite different scenario in which my watch is thoroughly dismantled and each material part that once composed it is destroyed and replaced with a new material part. If I’ve taken my watch in to the watch shop for this sort of exhaustive reconstructive procedure (perhaps I want to “upgrade” from stainless steel parts to titanium), will the watch that I pick up be the very watch I dropped off? Here, I think, our intuitions are less discordant. The total reconstruction results in a new watch.

Of course, what explains our intuitions, it is sure to be pointed out, may not be the fact that the watch is composed entirely (or even mostly) of new material, but rather that the watch I pick up is not immanent-causally connected to the one I dropped off. And this is indeed the case. So let’s imagine yet another twist to our story. Suppose you get wind of a rumor that certain watches have an uncanny mechanical ability, when triggered in the right sort of way (perhaps there is a button concealed to everyone but the most skilled watchmakers), to undergo exhaustive, part-by-part replication. That is, these, “smart watches” have, internal to them, a mechanism (endowed to them perhaps by God) which allows each part of the watch to replicate itself and to immediately destroy the original once replication is complete. Suppose the procedure continues for every part of the watch until the (only) remaining watch contains none of the parts belonging to the original. This would be a remarkable watch indeed. Being in the grip of a nagging curiosity, you decide to take your watch to one of these skilled watchmakers in order to discover whether yours is a smart watch. The button is discovered, and the process a success. Now, is the watch that is returned to you the very watch you dropped off?

Answering “yes” implies that the correct description of what I’m calling a “smart watch” is that it is a watch with a truly remarkable ability to replace every one of its constituent parts while nevertheless continuing to exist. Answering “no” implies that a smart watch is a watch with a surprising ability to bring about its own destruction while also spawning a duplicate. I prefer the latter description. [[39]](#footnote-39)

Human bodies undergo material-replacement as part of the routine and natural course of things. A body might change drastically (e.g. double in size or disfigure to the point of being unrecognizable), but so long as the replacement takes place gradually, the body survives the changes. The idea is perhaps best understood in terms of “assimilation,” where a body’s surviving the gaining (say) of new atoms is due to its ability to assimilate those atoms into its organizational structure. A complete replacement of atoms means that assimilation cannot occur. Zimmerman’s complaint with the assimilation objection (raised, in particular, by David Hershenov) is that any proposed assimilation principle turns out to be either too weak (precluding only a *complete* replacement of material bits) or else too strong (such that actual objects in our world appear to violate it).[[40]](#footnote-40)

But even without a precise assimilation principle in hand, the objection is powerful. There’s little reason, so far as I can see, to insist that the conditions for assimilation be precise. It is not difficult to identify clear cases in which assimilation fails to occur (e.g. when an organism undergoes a complete, or even a large-scale replacement of material parts) and there are clear cases in which assimilation succeeds (e.g. when an organism produces new skin cells to replace ones that have died). We can allow for vagueness. But the thrust of the objection remains. The persistence of material objects depends, in part, on the persistence of (at least some of) their constituent parts. On the falling elevator model, each of Wesley’s atoms buds a new atom which then leaps across space and time to compose Wesley in the afterlife. But given that none of these atoms was ever assimilated into Wesley’s pre-mortem body, they cannot compose him. Thus, the body in the afterlife is not Wesley, but a duplicate.[[41]](#footnote-41)

1. Conclusion

The materialist is motivated by a general scientific picture of the human person as, essentially, a material entity. A person’s temporal persistence, therefore, depends on her body’s persistence. I have argued that bodily persistence requires that adjacent body stages be both immanaent-causally connected and materially continuous. If a materialist of the sort I describe is also a Christian theist, she wants to know if persons of the sort she thinks there are can survive death. Assuming there is a viable affirmative answer – and, in my own view, the one offered over 30 years ago by van Inwagen remains the best candidate – she may be willing to put up with a little divine deception, assuming of course that such deception can be justified.

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1. I will be using the terms “materialism” and “physicalism” interchangeably throughout the paper. While there are differences between the two theses, those differences will not be relevant to the issues addressed here. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. See Kim(1998) and (2005). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Pereboom, p. 499. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., p. 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Being persuaded of so strong a version of materialism, as Pereboom is, we may wonder what explains his motivation to nonetheless establish a *nonreductive* account. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Kim (2006), p.11. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The nature of the dependence is, of course, a matter of debate among physicalists. The options here are familiar. Physicalists of various stripes appeal to such relations as type identity, token identity, supervenience (in its various formulations), constitution, realization, and so on. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Donald Davidson, “Mental Events, “ *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Kim (2006), p. 11. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. I use Melnyk (1994) as my model, though, notably, his theory is a version of ontological physicalism, rather than mind/body physicalism. Briefly, the view is that for any property *p*, *p* is either a physical property or a functional property that is realized by physical properties. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. And in any case, Melnyk points out that supervenience may follow from realization (though realization physics does not rely on supervenience for its formulation). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Notice that putting things this way precludes alternative views which deem embodiment a necessary condition of being of the kind human being, but not of the existence/persistence of persons. Aquinas, for example, posits that persons persist (though not as *human* persons) in the interim between death and resurrection as disembodied souls. For an articulation of Aquinas’ view, see Van Dyke (2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Charles Taliaferro and Stewart Goetz (2008) put forward a principle like this using the term, “physical” in place of “material” (but, as I’ve noted, I’m using those terms interchangeably throughout). [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Zimmerman (1999). [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Van Inwagen (1998). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Baker has in mind here identity in the strict, or Leibnizian, sense. There are more detailed arguments for the claim that constitution is not identity. See, for example, Baker (1997) and Johnston (1992). [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. Baker (2007), p. 337. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. O’Connor and Jacobs (2010), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I borrow this example from O’Connor and Jacobs (2010), p. 15. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Baker (2007), p. 340. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Lynne Rudder Baker, “Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection,” *Religious Studies* 43 (2007), p. 346. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. So long, I suppose, as the new body is a *human* body. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. For O’Connor and Jacobs, Wesley’s thisness is not a property, but a thin particular. See O’Connor and Jacobs (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Ibid., p. 10. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Importantly, O’Connor and Jacobs insist that immanent-causal connections are necessary, but not sufficient, for identity (that’s because preservation of a particularity is also required). However, what else (but the immanent-causal connections) are linking my pre-mortem body to my post-mortem one? In other words, the immanent-causal connections appear to be viewed as sufficient for material identity over time. And this, I’m claiming, is not satisfactory. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., p. 9. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Notably, the emergent individual view is not wedded to the claim that Wesley’s post-mortem earthly body contains the physical particles that constituted the pre-mortem Wesley. It could instead be his resurrection body that is constituted by those particles. But O’Connor and Jacobs resist this move for fear that it treads uncomfortably close to a “body-snatching” scenario (of the sort thought to plague van Inwagen’s view). [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Zimmerman (1999) and O’Connor and Jacobs (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Zimmerman (1999), p. 196. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I take it this is akin to a rejection of the “noseeum” inference in reply to the evidential argument from evil. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Van Inwagen (1998), p. 65. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Zimmerman (2010), p. 37. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. The terminology is borrowed from Eric who refers to Zimmerman’s account as the “Ontic-Leap Model.” [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. In addition to the two discussed here are objections launched by William Hasker and Eric Olson. Hasker’s contention is that (in virtue of being committed to a closest-continuer theory of personal identity), the view rejects the necessity of identity. See, in particular, Zimmerman’s discussion of Hasker in Zimmerman (2010). Olson argues that the sort of scenario Zimmerman describes is impossible. That’s because no miraculous powers (including the sort of “budding” attributed to the atoms by the falling elevator model) could insure that the atoms appearing in the next world would “find” any nonrandom spatiotemporal location (as well as the proper arrangement) so as to compose the resurrected body. Any power to bud new atoms at a determinate location would require a property analogous to momentum. But there is nothing analogous to momentum across a spatiotemporal gap. Zimmerman’s reply is to resist the claim that the momentum-like property needed to point an atom to a certain location must continue to be exemplified across the gap in order to land the atom in that location. See Olson (2010) and Zimmerman (2010) [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. Corcoran (2001). [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Zimmerman (2010), p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. I am here deviating from a van Inwagen-style metaphysic since van Inwagen denies that there are (non-living) objects (e.g. tables and cathedrals). See van Inwagen (1990). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. I suppose it could be insisted that immanent-causal connectedness is properly reserved for adjacent stages of (self-sustaining) *organisms.* But it seems we could imagine some kind of mechanistic analog. (God, say, directly fashions a watch to replicate at a preset time and builds it with precisely the mechanisms needed for the task). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See Hershenov (2002) and Zimmerman (2010). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. Zimmerman replies that this objection is based on the assumption that there are persisting simples, an assumption, he notes, which might be denied by certain interpretations of current physics. It may be, for example, that the laws governing our tiniest bits are all statistical and that an electron that starts a track in a cloud chamber cannot properly be said to be the very same electron that finishes the track. Now, it’s far from obvious that quantum mechanics cannot be squared with the existence of genuinely persisting particles, but Zimmerman appears to be assuming that even if there were no persistent particles, we should not conclude that organisms do not persist. I’m not so sure. But in any case, this issue takes us far afield into matters that, as Zimmerman agrees, are best left to physics. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)