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An Evaluation of Merricks' Physicalism

James Mitchell

In Merrick's article, he never provides any way of understanding how a person's resurrection body is numerically identical to the earthly body on physicalism. His main argument rests on appeals to scriptural support, but it seems that scripture does not force a physicalist position over other positions. This paper will not deal with the supposed biblical support for physicalism, though it seems obvious from a quick survey of the verses Merricks himself quotes that the Bible leaves this question unresolved. In fact, he even says the verses in his article could be consistent with a dualist interpretation. Nevertheless, the key issue in this discussion is whether there are grounds for numerical identity on a physicalist view. Though dualism is not without its own issues, dualism does offer a seemingly coherent explanation of how a person can maintain numerical identity through resurrection. Merricks, though, does not provide any explanation of how his position can maintain numerical identity; and if physicalism cannot account for numerical identity after resurrection, then this would be sufficient grounds for rejecting it. Interestingly, in his article, Merricks even provides reasons for rejecting the few explanations which seek to offer a grounding of numerical identity on physicalism. Thus, Merricks' article provides no reason to accept physicalism since

his position does not account for how numerical identity holds between a person before and after the resurrection of the body.

One of the strange aspects of Merricks' article is that he seems to undercut his own position throughout. He explains the positions which have historically been proposed in order to ground the numerical identity of persons through the resurrection, and then provides reasons for rejecting these positions. The best position which attempts to account for numerical identity on the physicalist conception is the reassembly of last parts view, whereby one holds the resurrection body is numerically identical to the earthly body due to the resurrection body containing the exact matter that the earthly body was composed of at the moment of death. This position—though it feels arbitrary—seems, nonetheless, to be the strongest position open to Merricks in order to ground identity. Merricks, though, raises all the objections to this position offered historically—some of the matter may no longer exist, some may belong to other persons at their death, etc.—and claims that the objections successfully refute this position.¹ Thus, he does the hard work for the dualist in raising successful objections to, arguably, the strongest position regarding the grounds of identity on a physicalist position.

In his other article, “The Resurrection of the Body”, Merricks rejects the spatiotemporal view of the identity of the resurrection body claiming that this view

1. Trenton Merricks, “The Resurrection of the Body and Life Everlasting,” in *Reason for the Hope Within*, ed. Michael J. Murray (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999), 272-73.

begs the question by presupposing that a person cannot cease to exist and then come back into existence. I found this to be an insightful point on his part, yet I find that he may have slightly misunderstood this position and the reason for proposing it. One issue that physicalism has pertains to the question of how it is possible for a person to maintain numerical identity through uninterrupted earthly life (by ‘uninterrupted’ here is meant a life without any temporal gaps). At the beginning of his article, he raises this issue but he never provides a sufficient answer. If this question cannot be answered on physicalism, then the whole position would seem to fall apart before even reaching the resurrection itself. The problem is that, if we are merely physical beings who are made up purely of matter, then how can we be the same person as our one-year-old self? Merricks asserts that we may maintain numerical identity through qualitative change over the course of life, but he does nothing to provide a reason for why this is the case or how it can be that we can assert identity in this way. On physicalism, it is not clear how one can maintain numerical identity through qualitative change at all. For instance, my current self has none of the same matter that made up my one-year-old self. I act differently and look completely different, though similarities do exist. Many of my qualities now are radically different than the qualities of my one-year-old self. On a physicalist view, the only way of grounding the identity between my one-year-old self and my current self seems to be through some version of spatiotemporal continuant theory, whereby one could maintain that a person is numerically

identical to their one-year-old self if they exist fully at successive moments which follow one another in an unbroken series from the first moment of existence—or something similar to this idea.

At first, it would seem that this presupposes the inability of a person to pass out of existence and come back into existence while maintaining numerical identity, but I do not think this is so. It seems instead that in trying to provide a theory of how a person can maintain identity over the course of their life, the consequence of the view is that temporal gaps cannot occur in the life of a person while preserving numerical identity. It is the ‘unbroken’, or continuous nature, of the series of moments which does the work of grounding numerical identity, for the person in the prior moment ‘became’ the person of the next moment through slight variation. Over time, great change could occur while the person remains the same by slight variation over a number of successive moments. If you claim that a person ceases to exist at some time, implying a temporal gap, and then they come back into existence at another time, the gap seems, intuitively, to imply that the person who ‘came back into existence’ is really just another person. This idea remains to be more fully considered. Nonetheless, it would seem that there is not much else that could ground numerical identity throughout a person’s life. Thus, when Merricks rejects this view by saying that it simply presupposes that a person cannot cease to exist and come back into existence, not only does he seem to misunderstand that

this is a consequence of the view rather than a presupposition, but he also seems to reject the best idea of maintaining personal identity over time.

Though in “The Resurrection of the Body and The Life Everlasting” Merricks does not provide a positive argument for his position, in his other article, “The Resurrection of the Body”, he does provide one. The argument is given by Merricks as follows:

1. Each of us—each human person—has physical properties.
2. You are neither heavier nor lighter than your body; your weight is the same as your body’s weight. You and your body have the same shape. You are located just where your body is located.
3. There is only one human-shaped object exactly and entirely located where you are exactly and entirely located. There is only one object with all of the physical properties had by you are your body.
4. Thus, you are identical to your body.²

The issue with this argument arises from what is presupposed and what is ignored. First, it seems that in the three premises Merricks presupposes that persons are identical to their bodies. The charge that Merricks made against the spatiotemporal understanding of identity can be raised again Merricks himself: he is begging the question. For example, take the second premise which claims ‘you

2. Trenton Merricks, “The Resurrection of the Body,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophical Theology*, eds. Thomas P. Flint and Michael C. Rea (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009), 482-83.

are not heavier nor lighter than your body'. A dualist would simply say that they are a soul, which has no weight, and thus the above statement is meaningless. Only if the self is purely physical does that premise hold. If the self is non-physical, or even not *completely* physical, the premise is false and the argument fails.

Second, the argument ignores one other widely-held proposition about human beings: human beings have mental properties. Merricks' argument given above would have been made much stronger if he had added this proposition, for he could have enunciated a position which would explain these mental properties as being ultimately reducible to physical properties. Nevertheless, many believe these mental states that humans have are best understood as non-physical. If it is the case that human persons have non-physical characteristics, this would cut against Merricks' above argument supporting the idea that human persons are not *completely* physical as mentioned in the previous paragraph. Thus, this argument is weak and seems to draw a hasty conclusion from insufficient premises.

Next, one of the most difficult problems for Merricks' physicalist view is Saul Kripke's origin essentialism, as famously articulated in "Identity and Necessity". Kripke's basic idea is that when speaking of identity conditions across possible worlds, if a thing—his example being a lectern—had a completely different origin in another possible world, then it would not be identical to the thing we are presently referring to—namely, *that* specific lectern. Kripke explains saying, "Supposing this lectern is in fact made of wood, could this very lectern have

been made from the very beginning of its existence from ice, say frozen from water in the Thames? One has a considerable feeling that it could not....”³ Kripke goes on to say that one could create a lectern out of ice from the Thames, but that would have been a different lectern.⁴ Thus, a thing’s origin is essential to that thing being *that* thing.

Now, let us take a human being as an example and apply Kripke’s idea to a concrete example. If Merricks’ idea is correct, then someone like David Hume, for instance, has died and has ceased existence. At the present moment in time, David Hume does not exist, but on the Day of Resurrection David Hume is brought back into existence by God. In his earthly life, David Hume was born on May 7, 1711, to Joseph and Katherine in Edinburgh, Scotland, he originated from a specific set of two cells, etc. Now, on Resurrection Day, the David Hume that was brought back into existence has a completely different origin. This David Hume was not born in 1711 to Joseph and Katherine. This David Hume did not arise through the union of two specific cells at all, much less the same two cells as before. This David Hume originated from a direct act of God on a day in the future. He did not pass through the birth canal, nor was it the union of two cells which caused the resurrection Hume to be conceived. The circumstances around his beginning to re-exist are totally

3. Saul Kripke, “Identity and Necessity,” in *Metaphysics: The Big Questions, 2nd Edition*, eds. Peter van Inwagen and Dean Zimmerman (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008), 531.

4. *Ibid*, 531.

different. Thus, with a totally different origin, Kripkean origin essentialism would infer that the resurrected David Hume is not numerically identical to the David Hume who lived in the 18th Century, and thus Merricks faces a serious objection to his physicalism.

However, one could simply reject origin essentialism and deny that it cuts against the physicalist understanding of the resurrection. They could claim that, though the origin is different, the resurrected Hume is qualitatively identical (or at least sufficiently similar) to the earthly Hume—they share all the same traits and characteristics; neither one has any quality or characteristic that the other lacks. Therefore, they are still numerically identical though with two separate origins. However, consider a brief thought experiment. Let us keep Hume as our example—he was born in 1711 and so on as mentioned above. Now, say someone is brought into existence who is qualitatively identical to David Hume *during Hume's life*. This second person—call him Daniel Hume—has all of the qualities that David has; he shares all of David's memories and traits. The only difference is that Daniel was born on a different day (for the sake of argument we can even say they share the same parents). It seems preposterous to say that they are numerically identical, for there are two separate people we are talking about. Thus, if they would not be identical in this instance, why would they be identical simply if their existences did not overlap in time? It seems that origin essentialism does, in fact, raise a serious problem for the physicalist claiming numerical identity through the resurrection.

At this point, let us briefly consider William Coward who argued that the resurrection body needs only to have ‘sufficient similarity’ to the earthly body.⁵ Coward believed that one could cease to exist and then be brought back into existence at the resurrection, so long as the resurrected person was essentially qualitatively identical to the pre-resurrection person (apart from glorification that occurs at this point in salvation, I presume). What is particularly interesting in considering William Coward’s view is he ultimately concluded that numerical identity of the person was *not* required at the resurrection.⁶ This conclusion is telling for it pertains to the issue of qualitative sameness in the resurrected person. As argued above, it seems that qualitative sameness cannot provide for numerical identity, and Coward himself provides a clear example of this as he ultimately felt compelled to conclude that the resurrection body is not numerically identical to the earthly body.

Further, in *Continuants and Continuity*, Robin Le Poidevin contributes an interesting idea to this conversation in the context of discussing two different theories of how objects persist through time. He makes the point, almost off-handedly, that “with living organisms, at least, we observe an unbroken chain of existence from the beginning of life to its end. Things do not go out of existence

5. Udo Thiel, *The Early Modern Subject: Self-Consciousness and Personal Identity from Descartes to Hume* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 91.

6. *Ibid.*, 91.

and then come back into existence again. With artifacts, of course, the case is otherwise.”⁷ The most striking aspect of this brief quote is that Le Poidevin simply assumes that Merricks’ position is false. He goes on to say that “where objects are not merely an arrangement of parts, we see only continuous existence.”⁸ Thus, for Le Poidevin, affirming that human persons are not merely physical organisms, and thus continuous existence is necessary for numerical identity, is an intuitive idea that we presuppose. His reason for this idea is that this way of thinking is ‘deeply entrenched’ in the way humans think about existence. This point is not insignificant, for our natural inclinations to think about things in certain ways often illuminate underlying truths. For example, my ‘deeply entrenched’ idea that the external world exists or that there exist other minds exterior to my own is held to be far more probably true than not. Therefore, we should not simply reject our natural way of thinking about existence and identity without strong evidence to reject it.

These issues would not be as much of a problem for dualism, for the soul never passes out of existence and thus the person never passes out of existence. Dualism can explain how persons maintain numerical identity through the aging

7. Robin Le Poidevin, “Continuants and Continuity,” *Monist: An International Quarterly Journal of General Philosophical Inquiry* 83 no. 3 (2000): <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=pif&AN=PHL1701432&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

8. Ibid., “Continuants and Continuity.”

process of the pre-resurrection life. Dualism is also consistent with origin essentialism, for the person only ever has one origin. Plus, to stretch Le Poidevin's point a little further, the natural assumption or idea that many people have of themselves is that they are not *completely* physical. This may not provide overwhelming evidence for a dualistic conception of human persons, for it could be consistent with other positions such as emergentism, but nevertheless is it telling. Therefore, dualism seems to be superior to physicalism in accounting for a clear, coherent understanding of human persons and the resurrection.

Ultimately, it seems that Merricks' physicalism faces numerous problems. His assumption at the beginning of "The Resurrection of the Body and Life Everlasting" that numerical identity can hold over the course of one's life and through the resurrection is never argued for or given sufficient grounding. Further, his positive argument for physicalism begs the question and presupposes that humans are merely physical beings causing the argument to be quite weak. Finally, William Coward and Robin Le Poidevin both (inadvertently it would seem) provide reasons to reject that physicalism can account for numerical identity. Ultimately, Merricks' articles look rather weak since there is little positive philosophical argument for how numerical identity can be maintained. Hence, it seems one should reject physicalism unless it can be shown that these objections can be overcome.

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