

Immortality

IV. Christianity

Immortality means the ability to live forever. The Christian tradition of thinking about immortality wrestled from its origins with the ancient Greek philosophical inheritance. In his *Phaedo*, Plato considered humans to be immortal because they are endowed with non-physical souls; immortality is an attribute of the soul, while the body is its “prison,” from which it will be freed after death. The New Testament provides Christianity with another position. In the famous passage on the resurrection (1 Cor 15:12–58), Paul affirms the resurrection of humans on account of Christ who was first raised from the dead. Thus immortality in Christianity is a gift. Only God is immortal; on account of Christ’s resurrection, immortality is given to mortals as gift in salvation. To this key notion is added another significant aspect based on Christ’s resurrection. Immortality means the resurrection of the body. Christ’s bodily resurrection, although as a body endowed with properties not limited to spatial restriction (i.e., Christ walking through closed doors in John 20:26), was the object of Christian hope that body and soul in their unity would be raised after death.

Early Christian theologians struggled with the dual legacy of the Platonist view of the soul’s immortality and the New Testament’s view of the bodily resurrection. In a context in which immortality was of existential concern, Christianity came to be regarded as the “medicine of immortality.” The idea of an immortal soul that had its origins in God could be connected to Gen 1:27, yet there was a danger that this connection brought the soul too close to God. Justin (*Dial.* 4–6) stressed that the soul was not un-begotten (ἀγέννητος), like God, and thus was not immortal (ἀθάνατος) by virtue of its being.

Origen, for example, appropriated the Platonic view that physical life is a purification process for the immaterial soul. The eternal Trinitarian God requires an eternal goal for its action. Yet the goal must be spiritual because there is no matter in God (cf. *Princ.* 1.4.3–5). Spiritual creatures are immortal, but are endowed with freedom. They sin by virtue of free will (*Princ.* 2.8.3) and are thereby alienated from God. Redemption for Origen means the return of souls to the spiritual world until the ‘Apokatastasis’ (*Princ.* 1.7.5; cf. 1 Cor 15:24–28). Origen was committed to the idea of the soul’s eternal relation to God. Yet because he held onto the idea of cyclical ages of the world, he was criticized for teaching the notion of “soul wandering” (Metempsychosis).

Other early Christian apologists rejected this Platonic notion. Tertullian (ca. 160–225 CE) argues in the tradition of Stoic metaphysics that all reality, including the soul, is corporeal and made from ma-

terial particles. Material continuity is thus necessary for survival. The reward for martyrdom was the “crown of immortality” (Eusebius, *Hist. eccl.*, bk. 5).

Gregory of Nyssa further developed the Platonist tradition. In *De mortuis oratio* he alludes to Plato’s *Phaedo* by describing the world, specifically the body, as “prison” of the soul. When death frees the soul from this prison, the soul is able to see the heavenly things for all eternity. In *De anima et resurrectione* Gregory of Nyssa defines the soul in view of Gen 1:26 as “created, living intellectual essence.” While the soul on earth can only strive towards God, it will be perfected at the eschaton in the mode of ὁμοίωσις θεῷ: God’s love facilitates the soul’s growth in knowledge, but through this process the soul only becomes similar to God, not like God. Christ wins immortality and incorruptibility for humans that is given to them in baptism. The soul is not pre-existent, but is created. The soul’s “post-existence,” if such a term can be used, is characterized by eternal participation in God as the result of redemption.

Augustine owes his understanding of the soul’s immortality to a reading of Plotinus, particularly the *Enneades* 4.7. According to Plotinus the soul is a spiritual nature that is noncorporeal. Thus the soul – because it knows truth and divinity – must be held apart from the body. When, however, the soul is connected to the body, it is still immortal and retains its capacity to both perceive and to orient itself to its origins in the divine realm. Augustine’s theology is based on this idea of the soul’s immortality (anima, sometimes also animus – spirit). The soul originates in the intelligible world and has its end there as well. Augustine conceives the body/soul dualism against the backdrop of eternity, and this conception orients his reading of the Bible. Yet his commitment to the soul’s immortality is in tension with Christian belief in the resurrection of the body. He never resolves this tension, neither in his early text *De immortalitate animae* nor in his main speculative work *De trinitate*. Already in book 2 of the *Soliloquia* Augustine gives a proof for the immortality of the soul. Only if the soul is immortal can it – following an ancient philosophical axiom – know the eternal God. Augustine takes up this argument in *Imm. an.* in order to work out the aporia of learning that is described in *Solil.* 2.19.33: How can the soul learn knowledge (disciplina), when it doesn’t already possess knowledge, and how can it possess knowledge, when it has not learned it? Augustine solves this problem in Platonist fashion: Knowledge is always present in the soul before it is even aware of it; the soul does not learn anything new, but discovers within itself what it has always known (cf. *Immort. an.* 2, 8–9, 17; *Solil.* 2.22, 24). Augustine’s solution presupposes the pre-existence of the soul, an idea that also refers to immortality. In the *Confessions*, how-

ever, Augustine derives introspection as the path towards knowledge of God from immortality. *Imm. an.* is unique among Augustine's texts because there is no Christian dimension to it. When Augustine works out his doctrine of sin, he relativizes the idea of the soul's immortality: The soul is indeed immortal, "but it can be said to die metaphorically through sin and loss of God and happiness" (O'Daly: 329). Yet Augustine remains committed to the idea of the soul's immortality; he continues to identify *vita* with *anima/animus* (*Immort. an.* 16; *Beat.* 2.7); because the soul is essentially alive, it cannot die.

With the re-discovery of Aristotle in late medieval philosophy, the reign of Platonism seemingly came to an end. Thomas Aquinas used the conceptual resources of Aristotelian hylomorphism (matter-form metaphysics). He construed human beings as compounds of matter and form. A human person is a substantial unity of soul (form) and body (matter). *Prima facie*, it seems that according to the Thomistic view, human persons are not identical to immaterial souls but are only partly composed of immaterial souls. Aquinas argues in the Aristotelian tradition that a human person is identical to an individual substance in the species of "rational animal." The person is neither the soul nor the body, but is constituted by soul (substantial form) and body (matter). Aquinas even argues, that "my soul is not me" (Aquinas, *Comm. 1 Cor.* 15.1.2.). Surprisingly, in the Thomistic account of resurrection the complete person can continue to exist without a body. The tradition assumes an intermediate state after natural death and before bodily resurrection. According to Aquinas, even in this impoverished state the person continues to exist and is able to contemplate God.

How is this possible? The person is more than just the sum of its constituent parts, soul and body. The person is constituted by soul and body, but not identical to them. The key to understanding survival in the afterlife seems to be that just as a person can survive the severance of a limb, so can the person survive the loss of its entire body, one of its constituent parts (cf. Stump). On the other hand: The person cannot survive the loss of the substantial form, the soul, in the same way it can survive the loss of the body. But if the soul can exist without the body, is it not then an independent entity, and thus in a Cartesian sense a substance (cf. Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* 1.75.4)? Personal identity depends solely on this substantial soul, which is embodied only accidentally. The Thomistic soul is, like a Platonic form, only a "visitor" in space and time. It belongs to a non-material realm. If the matter configured by a Platonic form ceases to exist, the form nevertheless continues to exist. The same is true for the soul in Aquinas. The ontological priority of the immaterial soul in the Thomistic account

becomes even more prominent when the issue of *bodily* resurrection is considered. For Aquinas, the resurrected body is identical to the earthly body, even after a temporal gap during the intermediate state. How can a corruptible body, made from materials like water and carbon, be identical to an incorruptible body made from some entirely different "spiritual stuff"? It seems that the body that did exist in this world did not endure so as to exist in the afterlife.

According to Aquinas the resurrected body is identical to the natural body because each substance has but *one* substantial form. It is not the case that the soul as form works on other substantial forms as mediators (like molecules, chemical elements etc.). The soul as substantial form directly configures prime matter (cf. *Summa theologiae* 1.76.4; *De principiis naturae* 1.349). Prime matter is not a substance; it has no form of its own. All it can do is receive forms. Thus, whenever the soul becomes embodied (inserted in prime matter) the *very same body* is formed. The body receives its identity entirely from the soul. The ontological priority of the soul is striking. Aquinas is indeed not a substance dualist, "because what there is to the body if it is abstracted from the soul – prime matter – hasn't the stature to be a partner in any sort of dualism. It cannot even exist on its own" (Leftow: 137–38). On the Thomistic account, a human being is just "a soul dipped in dust" (cf. Leftow).

The Protestant Reformers insisted on the centrality of Christ for understanding life after death, while at times gesturing to the Platonic legacy. Martin Luther rejected the notion of purgatory that had been affirmed in Catholicism since the Fourth Lateran Council from 1254. Luther regarded this notion, developed on Augustine's distinction between the purifying fire that purged souls and the fire of the Last Judgment (Bremmer: 66 ■ pls provide bibliographical information ■), as unscriptural. Luther's focus is christocentric and biblical: the passage through death to eternal life is accompanied by Christ, the angels, and all the saints (Luther 1969: 112); after death life is characterized by the eternity of the triune God. The future life in God is an object of faith, not rational thinking: "Unless we believe it by faith, eternity is beyond expression." (Luther 1972: 227 [to Isa 53 : 8]) Given his Christological focus, Luther sees immortality entirely in terms of the bodily resurrection (Wiemer: 170–82).

John Calvin, noted for his early treatise *Psychopannychia* (1534/42), addresses the soul in the interim between death and the Last Judgment, an issue first noted by Augustine concerning the soul's relation to the divine immortality during a period in which it was separated from the body. Calvin denounces Anabaptists and some Lutherans who insist that the soul "sleeps" during this time, and af-

firms a notion of “rest,” thereby integrating the Platonic idea of the soul’s immortality in relation to Paul’s notion in Phil 1:23 concerning a desire for death in order to be with Christ.

With the Enlightenment the idea of immortality took a critical turn. Immanuel Kant made the immortality of the soul a postulate of practical reason, arguing that the progress of virtue was an infinite task (5:133; p. 246). The theologian Friedrich Schleiermacher took Kant’s critical philosophy in order to claim that the doctrines concerning the “last things,” specifically the resurrection of the body and life eternal, were to be considered “prophetic doctrines,” meaning that they refer to future possibilities rather than to immediate self-consciousness. While their content is related to the NT, according to Schleiermacher’s logic, it does not belong in the canon of scripture and is merely an expression of yearning and hope (1999: §§ 257–63).

Emanuel Swedenborg’s *Heaven and Hell* from 1758 offers a speculative alternative to the critical restrictions in Kant’s legacy. Swedenborg recounts visions he had about life in the next world, claiming that there is no metaphysical gap between this world and the world of the dead (McDannell/Lang: 186). After death, the soul enters the spirit world, a middle place between heaven and earth. The soul’s functions continue just as on earth; one’s personality and lifestyle remains, and life continues to be inherently social. Swedenborg’s visions inspired Emerson and were ridiculed by Kant (McDannell/Lang: 182). The significant idea is that souls are transparent to their inner nature; they can thus progress psychologically and spiritually, though not as a result of punishment or purgation, but in society until a point where they are deemed ready for the higher state of heaven. Thus Swedenborg added a social dimension to the Kantian legacy of eternal progress. Ralph Waldo Emerson, who acknowledges Swedenborg as an inspiration writes in his “Immortality” that depth characterizes immortality, not length. On encountering a great person and their works, one experiences “immortal moments” that comes from “a great integrity” or “a deep love” or “a strong will [that] arms us above fear.”

In 20th-century Protestant theology there was a general tendency to abandon classical metaphysics as a conceptual tool in understanding the Christian notion of immortality. The Greek notion of an indestructible immaterial soul seemed inadequate to capture the two tenants of this Christian doctrine: bodily resurrection and divine grace as sole cause of survival. A radical proposal was made by the so-called “Ganztod-Theologie” which was developed by Karl Barth (cf. Barth: 524) and others. According to this view, the entire person as a psycho-physical unity dies completely at the time of natural death. The person is not endowed with an immaterial sub-

stance that is not subjected to physical decay and destruction. After having died completely, the person is then re-created anew by the grace of God on judgment day, or – alternatively – immediately following natural death. While this view successfully emphasizes the role of grace, it fails to offer a theoretically rigorous alternative to the traditional philosophical theories it wished to overcome for a simple reason: The modus operandi of how some person that was entirely created anew by God could be me (or someone else who had died, for that matter) is not answered.

Filling this theoretical gap, contemporary analytic philosophy gave rise to a renaissance of rigorous and conceptually advanced theories of Christian immortality. Since dualism was no longer the dominant position in recent philosophy of mind, many analytic theologians and philosophers tried to develop accounts, which were not conceptually tied to Platonic or Cartesian forms of dualism. One promising candidate is the so-called “constitution theory,” which was made popular by Lynne Baker. Its central claim is that a person is neither identical to a biological organism, nor is it an independently existing substance. The physical body is not identical to the person, but it constitutes the person. A substantial soul is not required. The constitution theory promises “Christianity without the soul” and still avoids collapsing into materialism. The body is not identical to the person because it lacks some of the properties the person has. The body as such has no intentional states. Neither my hand nor my brain tissue ever wants to greet another person, only a person has the mental state of wanting to greet someone. Persons are thus essentially beings with a capacity for mental content or *intentional states*. Even more specifically, a person is essentially a being with the reflexive capacity to think of oneself as oneself, a being that is endowed with a *first-person perspective*. Finally, persons are *essentially* constituted by a *physical organism*. Persons cannot survive the destruction of their body, but persons constituted by a body can survive radical changes in their constituting matter. It is necessary for a person to have *a* constituting body, but it may not be necessary to have the *same* body all the time. This account opens up interesting possibilities for understanding bodily resurrection.

The Christian belief in the afterlife requires the surviving person to be the very same as the person that existed in the natural world. The resurrected human person must ultimately be embodied because human persons are essentially embodied. But it might not be the same body. The earthly biological body is corruptible, the resurrected body is incorruptible. Whatever is corruptible is essentially corruptible. Thus pre- and post-mortem body cannot be identical. Baker argues that other attempts to somehow preserve bodily identity (like Paul’s

seed-kernel metaphor) are much less plausible than just giving up the bodily identity requirement. She reads 1 Cor 15:50 in this way. Paul writes: “flesh and blood can never possess the kingdom of God, and the perishable cannot possess immortality.” The corruptible body cannot possess immortality. Earthly organisms are essentially biological and built from physical particles. Everything that is biological and built from physical particles is essentially corruptible. The resurrected body is incorruptible, thus it cannot be numerically identical to a biological organism, which is just a physical body. There is no identity preserving transformation from one to the other.

The constitution view does not take being-a-person as a contingent property of a fundamentally non-personal organism. It gives the person much greater ontological independence. A person is not a biological organism that during certain times of its lifespan displays personal characteristics. A person is only constituted by an organism. For a person to survive means that a first-person perspective survives. How can a first-person perspective survive if it is not an indestructible substance? Here Baker uses the classical distinction between free and natural divine knowledge: Free knowledge is divine knowledge of contingent truths, natural knowledge is divine knowledge of logical and metaphysical necessities. Whether a resurrected body constitutes my first-person perspective is a contingent fact, known freely by God. Therefore, whether or not it obtains depends entirely on God’s free creative decree. Thus, neither a substantial soul nor bodily identity is required for post-mortem existence. It all depends on whether God creates the unique first-person perspective by having it constituted by a non-physical body. Baker’s theory thus has a surprising resemblance to the “Ganztod” idea of a complete natural death and subsequent new creation. Whether the re-created body, which is not identical to my earthly body, constitutes in fact *me* is entirely up to a Divine decree.

By making the person independent of a particular physical body, this constitution theory does still resemble classical dualism. It denies only the strongest form of dualism, according to which the human person can exist in a disembodied way. The first-person perspective has, however, non-empirical identity conditions, which resemble those of souls. In fact, the identity conditions of persons as first-person perspectives are indistinguishable from the mere “thisness” or *haecceitas* that according to the prominent Christian dualist Richard Swinburne individuates souls. It seems that the Christian belief in immortality cannot rid itself of an at least implicit or “thin” reference to something like a soul.

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