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Chapter 6

Seeds

On Personal Identity and the Resurrection

Sophie-Grace Chappell

It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body.

—1 Corinthians 15.44

1. BODILY RESURRECTION: SEEDS AND PLANTS

The New Testament doctrine of the general resurrection says that at the end of human history all human beings who are not then alive anyway will be "raised from the dead": that is, they will be brought back to life out of their previous state of death, in preparation for the life either of heaven, or of another place. Both our two main New Testament sources for this doctrine, the Jesus of the Gospels and the St Paul of the Epistles, indicate that the life of the general resurrection will not be altogether like the present life of ordinary human beings (any more than, according to the New Testament, the resurrected Jesus was altogether like the pre-resurrection Jesus). It seems clear, for example, that "Will they still be married to their pre-resurrection partners?" is not an applicable question (see, e.g., Matthew 22.30), and neither is "What age, and how healthy, will they be when resurrected?" (see 1 Corinthians 15.35–44).

The commonest New Testament metaphor for the relation of this life to the resurrection life is that of seed and plant (1 Corinthians 15.37, John 12.24). The implications about what kind of "plant" might result from the "seed" of this life are unclear, and perhaps meant to be unclear: "It does not yet appear what we shall be" (1 John 3.2). Nonetheless it is plain from the New Testament that humans' resurrection life, like their pre-resurrection life, will not merely be the life of ghosts or spirits (whatever, if anything, that might be). The doctrine is that the resurrection life of those who are now physical human beings will also be a life of physical human beings. Whatever 1 Corinthians

15.44 may mean by contrasting the present and the resurrection body as *psykhikon* (soul-ish) and *pneumatikon* (spiritual), respectively, St Paul clearly does think that both bodies are indeed *bodies*.

The philosophical interest of this Christian doctrine is as obvious as its historical importance. It was already the subject of sustained theological and philosophical scrutiny even before Christianity because it was a doctrine of Pharisaical Judaism before it was a Christian doctrine; later on, it was a Muslim doctrine too. Yet despite two thousand years or more of intensive examination in three separate, and each huge, religious traditions, I have the temerity to suggest that I have some new things to say about it. My new thoughts—if indeed they are new—arise in the context of the debate about personal identity that the doctrine naturally leads us into.

2. PHYSICAL IDENTITY

The doctrine of the resurrection leads us to questions about personal identity when that doctrine is challenged on grounds of metaphysical rather than physical impossibility. Resurrection is, of course, miraculous. So resurrection will be impossible if miracles are impossible. But it is very hard to show that miracles are impossible via the lemma that miracles are physically impossible. Everyone knows that miracles are physically impossible; that's the whole point of calling them miracles. It is built into the very idea of a miracle that events can be physically impossible, yet nonetheless possible: in this respect "physically impossible" is perhaps supposed to be roughly on all fours with "legally" or "politically" or "morally impossible." So to infer directly from "miracles are physically impossible" to "miracles are impossible" is to beg the question against the believer in miracles. What is needed to avoid question begging is some further reason to think, with David Hume, that there are predictive-explanatory physical laws¹ that are never ever broken at all—laws that are never, to use Hume's revealingly emotive term, "violated." But it is harder to supply this further reason than to turn instead to the claim that some miracles, for instance resurrection, are metaphysically impossible. So this is what most opponents of the doctrine of the resurrection prefer to do.

Thus, as is often pointed out, there might be metaphysical reasons why we cannot say that the Sophie Grace Chappell who will be raised from the dead at the last trumpet is *the very same person* as me, Sophie Grace Chappell, here and now. And then, it may look metaphysically impossible for *me* to be raised from the dead: it may look as if the most that can happen is that some being very like me and continuous with me in various ways can be raised from the dead. But that, it can be objected, is not the resurrection of *me* because of the violation of the conditions of personal identity over time that

it involves. And so, even if there is no way of showing that my resurrection is a physical impossibility—at least, not in any sense of "physical impossibility" that means it can't actually happen: see 2.1—still we can show that my resurrection is a *metaphysical* impossibility. And that *does* mean that it can't actually happen.

This conclusion follows readily from a wide range of currently influential accounts of personal identity. Suppose for instance we think, as modern "animalists" do,² and as the Aristotle of *de Anima* apparently does (at least sometimes), that identity of organism is necessary and sufficient for personal identity: we have the same person if and only if we have the same living animal, or animal. But what does it take for us to have that? We might say that we have the same *living* animal only as long as we have the same *life*, meaning the same uninterrupted time extent of life. On that interpretation, even Lazarus raised from the dead after three days (John 11), or the little girl raised with the words "Talitha coumi!" after a couple of hours of being dead (Mark 5.41), do not count as the same living animal after resurrection, and so, do not count as the same persons. Moreover, if this is the right view to take of the metaphysics of personal identity, then nothing that even God can do could make the raised Lazarus, or the raised little girl, into the very same persons as they were before they died. That is what it means to say that resurrection is not merely a physical but a metaphysical impossibility.

Or we might say (stipulate?) that the same life can be continued around a (brief?) interruption, provided the body remains substantially the same (or, to use a perhaps less loaded adverb, materially the same). Lazarus and the little girl in Mark would then be genuine cases of resurrection rather than, as it were, of surrection: that is, they would be the restoration to life of the same person, rather than the instauration in life of some new person very like and uniquely closely connected to the previous person.

Obviously enough, however, there is little comfort here for believers in the doctrine of a general resurrection of the dead at the end of the world. If this is to be metaphysically possible, and equally possible for all those to be resurrected, then it cannot depend on the availability of a materially-the-same body on which the miracle of resurrection is to be worked. For such a body will not be equally available in all cases; in many cases, it will not be available at all.

Fairly obviously, we do not have the same body, or not for very long, once someone has died. As the Yorkshire county anthem *On Ilkley Moor bar 't* canonically points out,³ it is not very long, once the processes of decomposition and the activity of graveyard worms have got to work on Joe's dead body, before the physical matter that previously counted as Joe's body comes to count as something else. Perhaps that matter will come to count as the worms that eat Joe's body; or possibly as the ducks that come

and eat up the worms: or maybe, even, as the other demizens of England's most sinister county who later come along and eat up the ducks. Much of the actual bodily material of any dead person, even a carefully buried one—even an Egyptianly embalmed one—is pretty swiftly fugitive, and also quite frequently fugitive into the bodily material of other persons, even when those other persons are not (at least in the usual sense) cannibals. Moreover, it is natural to think that even reconstituting a body *just like Joe's* will not count as reconstituting *Joe's body*; the career of the physical object that was Joe's body finished shortly after Joe's death, and no future possible object can be taken as actually numerically identical with Joe's body. At most it will be a perfect simulacrum. So if we take bodily identity to be at least necessary for personal identity, then it is hard to see how we can believe that resurrection is a metaphysical possibility. For nothing that even God could do to any dead body could count as bringing back *the very same body as before*; because of the discontinuity, not even the very same atoms in the very same shape would count as that.

It makes little difference to this argument what level of constitution we take "sameness of body" at. If we think that we don't have the same body unless we have the same atoms or molecules, then it does not take death to disrupt the sameness of the body. Human bodies lose and gain their atomic constituents all the time, "flowing like Heraclitean rivers" (Plato, *Theaetetus* 160d), so that even a body *not* disrupted by death is not constituted by the same or anything like the same individual atoms for very long at all. Something like the same story holds at the cellular level too. Few cells in the body are preserved intact throughout the life of the human organism, though undeniably most of those of the bones and brain are. Few philosophers have wanted to argue that the criterion for sameness of person is sameness of skeleton, though many have argued for a same-brain criterion, or for taking continuity of bodily *function* to be more important than strict identity of bodily *parts*. And at all these levels alike we face the same problem: it is hard to see how a physical organism, or functional assemblage of physical parts, that is re-formed in the way that resurrection seems to require, can be *the very same* organism or assemblage, as opposed to a simulacrum of it.

Of course, we might respond to this difficulty by just denying the aforementioned "natural thought" that personal identity depends on numerical identity rather than qualitative identity. So maybe (we could say) it's all right for the resurrection body to be a simulacrum of the mortal body, rather than the very same thing as it. But most philosophers will respond that that does not sound right as a point about identity over time *in general*. If a penny is melted down, and a new penny forged from the molten metal, we say that we have a new penny. And we do not say that it is the very same penny as the one that was melted to make it, even if they are, qualitatively, exact simula-

(We do not say that, even though these two different pennies also have largely the same material in them.) If it isn't right to say this, then it is hard to see why is it right to say something parallel in parallel cases; for example, that a divinely fashioned future simulacrum of my body, made long after it has been destroyed, will be numerically identical with my present body. Here too there seem to be metaphysical limits on what even God can do to make it true that some body is the very same body as *my* body.

The New Testament's seed and plant metaphor, to come back to that, suggests, interestingly, there is a *kind* of continuity between my life in this world and my resurrection life, and a kind of one-to-one relation as well; but there is also a blank period in between the "death" of the seed—its sowing in the ground—and the "rising" of the resultant plant at the harvest of the resurrection. The biology of what actually goes on during the period between the sowing of a seed and the sprouting of a plant must have been at least partly obscure to the New Testament writers. In modern biology, the seed-plant relation is *not* an instance of strict identity over time, though it typically is one of unique continuity. In any case, the image certainly does not make it plain that the relation between the life of this world and the resurrection life is supposed to be straightforwardly and simply a relationship of identity over time—or that it is *not* supposed to be that.

A sort-of-Thomist solution to this difficulty about bodily continuity—I hesitate to say that it is actually St Thomas's, though it might be St Thomas's as far as I understand it⁴—goes rather deeper, and raises the good question, what *makes* any material object the same material object over time. The Thomist answer is "the form": the reason why my body goes on counting as the same body, is because the same form continues to, well, inform it. So, this sort of Thomist apparently infers, that form can be imposed on *any* suitable matter, and the matter in question will count as my body.

The trouble is that the same Thomists who (as far as I can make out) are happy to say this in one breath, are equally happy to say in the next breath that there are no individual forms, and that what distinguishes one human from another is not the human form—in which all members of the human species equally share—but the different matter in which that form is instantiated in each individual. Particular humans are to one another as particular pennies are: same type, different tokens, and no essential difference between them except that the type is realized, in each particular case, in different stuff. This move seems to get us straight back into our previous perplexity, with an added twist: it now looks as if the human matter is only individuated by the human form, while the human form is only individuated by the human matter. Sometimes these Thomists add that, for the purposes of resurrection, what picks me out as uniquely *me* is neither my human form nor my human matter, but the self-individuating that I have engaged in during the biological

career of my life. But for one thing, this proposal does not seem to give babies who died in the womb much chance of counting as individuated from other persons, which has the consequence—a serious one for most Thomists—that it is hard to see how resurrection can be available to these babies. And for another thing, this proposal seems to move us into quite different territory from any bodily, substantial, or organismic criterion for personal identity: the territory of psychological or mental criteria. It is perhaps time to explore that territory anyway.

3. PSYCHOLOGICAL IDENTITY

We need waste little time on the familiar ways of making a mental or psychological account of personal identity look thoroughly implausible. Such an account does not have to be a view about something called mental substance or soul-stuff, the behavior of which mimics the behavior of either physical matter or individual substance or both—except in the ways that it doesn't. If personal identity were dependent upon identity of soul-stuff or mental material, then the problems about the preservation of personal identity through death and resurrection would be closely parallel to the problems that arise for a physical or bodily criterion of personal identity, except that we all know what physical materials and individual animals are, and none of us knows what soul-stuff or mental material might be.

The psychological or mental views of personal identity that are worth considering highlight a question that seems importantly missing from, or at best downplayed by, physical or organismic accounts: the question of what it is about myself that I do, or should, *want* to survive into some future or resurrection life. (Assuming that I want, or should want, anything to survive: more about that assumption later.) It is hard to imagine how, or why, someone who wants *herself* to survive could be satisfied with a version of survival that involves her body's persistence, but not her mind's, or more specifically her conscious experience's persistence. If the "concern to survive" is just the concern that my body go on existing, no matter what may happen to my conscious mind and my viewpoint on the world, then the concern to survive seems barely intelligible. (More on this later as well.)

Perhaps the most obviously intelligible form of "the concern to survive" is the one that takes the concern that I should survive as the conjunction of two distinct concerns, both of them psychological and mental in content. The first concern is that I should go on having the kind of experiential life that I have now (with, of course, an at least minimally happy and pleasant content); the second concern is that I should know that I go on having this experiential life. The two concerns are indeed distinct, though it is also true that the first is

implied by the second (because if I know p, then p) and the second is implied by the first (because, as Aristotle observed,⁵ it is part of having an experiential life of the kind that normal humans have that we know that we have that experiential life).

Now for me to *know* at any time that I am going on having the same experiential life as I was having at some previous time, it has to be *true* that I am going on having that life. What makes it true? What are the conditions for my thought "I am still having the same experiential life as I was having at t" to be true? Or to come at it another way: under what circumstances could someone think this thought, and it be *false*?

The trouble here is that there is no obvious way of identifying something as the same experiential life so to speak "from inside": I may think the thought specified earlier, but it is hard to see how it can turn out true just because I think it. Are such thoughts perhaps immune to error through misidentification? But that suggestion raises the issue of *what* this thought is identifying—that is, the question what "I" refers to as used in that thought. And the obvious answer to this question is that "I" refers to the living human animal that I am.⁷ The alternative, apparently, is that "I" refers to the thinker of this thought; but if this thinker is something other than that living human animal, it is mysterious what. (Compare here the well-known too-many-thinkers problem raised by defenders of animalism such as Eric Olson.⁸)

Similar problems arise if we say, as we might be tempted to—it is a thought that appeals to Lynne Rudder Baker,⁹ for instance, and I must say to me too—that the referent of "I" is the particular perspective on the world that I am. Undoubtedly something crucial about what it is to be a person is missed out, if we miss out the fact that persons are, or at any rate have, perspectives on the world. But that is not a good enough reason to rely perspectives. It does not seem possible to identify a perspective without identifying where it is a perspective *from*: or to put it another way, without identifying the creature whose perspective it is. Compare how we identify viewpoints, which should not be reified either, and for very similar reasons. The view north from the top of Dundee Law is a very particular (and very beautiful) view, with particular and easily specifiable contents. Still, it seems obvious that the best way to fix reference to it is not "internally," by referring to those contents, but "externally," by giving physical coordinates that locate the viewpoint in space. Of course *seeing* that view is something separate from those coordinates; but it would be odd to think, perhaps for this reason, that that view itself was something separable from a position and an orientation in space.

And so the defender of the doctrine of the resurrection reaches a kind of impasse about personal identity. On the one hand, physical, bodily, or organismic, accounts of the conditions of personal identity do not seem able to give the believer in the resurrection what is needed for it to be true that

any person's resurrection is actually *that person's* resurrection; nor do they capture the content of the concern to survive. But mental or psychological accounts of the conditions of personal identity are best understood as involving self-referential uses of "I," and the "I" that is so referred to apparently cannot be simply a mental or psychological entity. It evidently needs to be identified bodily—which gets us straight back into the difficulties of the physical accounts.

Does this mean that the doctrine of the resurrection is incompatible with any plausible account of personal identity? No, it doesn't. Actually the main thing that it does is draw our attention to the serious philosophical problems facing all the accounts of personal identity that we have considered so far.

4. GRADATED IDENTITY OVER TIME

One difficulty with these standard accounts is that they are implausibly absolute. The difficulty here has been with us about as long as philosophy has. In its true and indubitable form, identity is a logical relation, and it sustains the indiscernibility of identicals: if $A = B$ and A is F , then B is F . But concrete objects change over time; and that means, they change in the predicates that are true of them. So if $A = B$ where A and B are (or are supposed to be) names of the same concrete object at different times, then for some F , A will be F and B will *not* be F . But if $A = B$, this is a contradiction. So either the "identity over time" of concrete objects is not an instance of true identity—of the logical identity relation; or else we relativize these two predications to different times to avoid the contradiction (so the object is F -at- t_1 and not- F -at- t_2 , without contradiction).¹⁰

The latter can be done, of course. Philosophers have been deploying this and other strategies in order to argue that identity over time can be understood as a strict identity relation ever since Plato and Aristotle. It is not my intention to suggest that it can't be understood that way. What I do mean to suggest is that an air of stipulation or conventionality hangs over the whole exercise.

There is a logical gap between our talk of identity as all-or-nothing, and the indefinitely gradated judgments on which this all-or-nothing identity-talk is based. We say, for instance, that the ship of Theseus on March 1 is the same ship as the ship of Theseus on December 1; and this is meant as a judgment of strict identity. But on the most usual and most plausible accounts of identity over time, that all-or-nothing identity holds because the March-1 object is close enough to the December-1 object in three ways which are all of them matters of degree: *spatiotemporal path*, *overlap of constituents*, and *qualitative similarity*. We say that when we have *enough* closeness in these three ways, then the March-1 ship and the December-1

ship are—absolutely—identical; but that when we don't have enough, they are—absolutely—not. In short, identity judgments are nonvague; yet, the judgments by which they are justified *are* vague. And then the worry is that for each of these criteria, the answer to the question "How much closeness is enough?" is going to have to be settled by convention at best, or else, and much less plausibly, by outright stipulation. (Even if epistemicism was true, and there was an exact limit to how much closeness was needed for identity, just one that we cannot possibly know,¹¹ what would set that limit?)

Saying that that answer is settled by convention is likely to mean that it is settled, ultimately, by reference to human purposes. For it is ultimately human purposes that determine when it is useful, and when it is not so useful, to designate objects at different times as counting as *the same ship*. The sortsals that we put into most of our identity judgments—"same ship," "same book," "same company," "same chemical"—are terms that we use because they serve some purpose in human life. The ways in which we determine how those sortsals apply—and when they have no clear application—are fashioned, likewise, by human interests and human purposes: it is ultimately human purposes that determine when it is useful, and when it is not so useful, to designate objects at different times as counting as *ships*. Moreover, it is only because the sortsals are conventional in this way that it is even possible for the relations of identity over time in which they appear to have the status of strict identity relations. Artificiality is necessary here because the world itself is not so obligingly tidy.

But "book," "company," "chemical" are artifact sortsals (or at least, the first two are). Can I extend the scope of these remarks to cover *all* sortsals, including those that, according to many theorists of personal identity, stand for natural kinds, such as *human being* and *animal*? And including *person*, if person is indeed a proper sortsal?

A Battle of the Giants seems to be looming here about whether any of our sortsals reach into the essential nature of reality, or whether they all merely represent our conventional outlook on reality. As usual in such *gigantomachiai*,¹² it can quickly become difficult to avoid getting polarized into implausibly extreme views, or to hold on to the rather obvious thought that unless our sortsals had *some* grip on "the essential nature of reality," then neither they nor "our conventional outlook" would have much hope of making any sense at all. Still my own suspicion, as I say, is that nature is a lot less tidy than Aristotelianism makes out (or than Aristotelianism *is*), and that there is no particular reason to exempt natural-kind sortsals from at least a degree of the same kind of relativity to human interests that marks all our other sortsals.

But fortunately I do not need to join this particular fray. There is another way to go at this point.