

THE POSSIBILITY OF RESURRECTION

I will begin by making a particular point about Professor Mavrodes' formulation of "Leibniz's Law."¹ Then I shall make some remarks about issues more central to his paper.

I agree with Professor Quinn's contention that Mavrodes' reformulations of his initial statement of Leibniz's Law are needless.² I want to add a footnote to Quinn's discussion of the first reformulation. Consider:

1. Mavrodes, as a youth, had brown hair
2. Mavrodes, in middle age, has grey hair.

In these sentences, "as a youth" and "in middle age" are adverbial phrases modifying "had" and "has". Assimilating them to the subject by hyphenation to form putative noun-phrases can only lead to confusion. When we have done this and have produced some such sentence as

3. Mavrodes-as-youth is identical with Mavrodes-in-middle-age

(or its negation) we have produced a sentence that cannot be translated back into adverbial form. For consider:

4. Mavrodes, as a youth, is identical with Mavrodes, in middle age.

¹ See George Mavrodes, "The Life Everlasting and the Bodily Criterion of Identity," *Noûs* XI (1977) pp. 27-39. Mavrodes' paper was the lead paper in a symposium on the philosophy of religion at the 1977 meeting of the Western Division of the American Philosophical Association. The present paper was a contribution to that symposium, as was Professor Philip Quinn's "Personal Identity, Bodily Continuity and Resurrection" in this journal, this number, pp. 101.

² *Op. cit.*, pp. 104.

What verb do the two adverbial phrases in (4) modify? Well, "is" is the only one available. But, to speak anthropomorphically, the two adverbial phrases in attempting simultaneously to modify "is" trip over each other's feet. (Cf. "Mavrodes today speaks yesterday".) If the trick of assimilating adverbs to nouns were allowed in general, we could produce puzzles about identity that clearly have nothing to do with time. For example, suppose the following two sentences

5. Mavrodes, seen full-face, is handsome
6. Mavrodes, seen from behind, is of undistinguished appearance

express truths. Now let's form the "names" "Mavrodes-seen-full-face" and "Mavrodes-seen-from-behind". Does

7. Mavrodes-seen-full-face is identical with Mavrodes-seen-from-behind

express a truth or a falsehood? (Perhaps we have here the germ of a new philosophical problem: the problem of perspectival identity.) But of course there really is no problem here. "Mavrodes seen-full-face" and its partner in crime cannot be construed as referring expressions; and neither can "Mavrodes-as-youth" and "Mavrodes-in-middle-age".

In what follows, there is one word that I shall avoid using: "body". I have no idea what this word means, at least as Mavrodes and Quinn use it. Each of them talks as if it were obvious that there is associated with each of us in some intimate way a physical object called "his body." But I am unable to determine what that object might be. More precisely, I am unable to determine what such phrases as "Mavrodes' body" are supposed to *mean*. The word "body" in these phrases cannot simply be redundant (like "himself" in "Mavrodes himself") or such questions as the question whether Mavrodes might "have different bodies at different times" would make no sense whatever.

At any rate, it seems to be no part of Christian doctrine that each of us has a thing called "a body." There is, of course, the doctrine called "the Resurrection of the Body" in which all Christians must believe. How the doctrine got that *name* is an interesting question that belongs to the history of ideas. What the doctrine *says* (in part)

is that one day all or most dead men will be restored to life by God, and that after this restoration these men will not be “ghosts” or “pure spirits” (whatever precisely those terms might mean) but will be able to walk about and touch one another, and to speak aloud; they will reflect light, have definite positions in space, and will each of them weigh a certain number of pounds.

In the next age, two men meet and one of them, pointing to a third man, says, “that man was killed in an automobile accident two years before I was born.” It is part of the Christian faith that it will one day be possible to speak such words as these and to say something *literally* true. Mavrodes’ problem is this: to explain how such words could ever express a literal truth when (Flew and others allege) there is no criterion one could possibly apply to “identify” a man standing before one with some man who was long ago killed in an accident. Mavrodes responds to this challenge by arguing for a conclusion that (considered very abstractly) may be put like this: if it is possible to state explicitly a criterion of identity through time for objects of *any* sort, then there must be objects of *some* sort such that individual objects of this sort can be correctly said to exist at different times *and* are such that we need *no* criterion to make such statements. Thus (Mavrodes argues), it is no objection *per se* to the doctrine of resurrection to point out that the people living in the next age will have no criterion they could apply to determine whether one of their number is the same man as the man who did such-and-such in the previous age.

I think Mavrodes is right about this. But what he says does not seem to me to go to the root of the problem. The real philosophical problem facing the doctrine of resurrection does not seem to me to be that there is no criterion that the men of the new age could apply to determine whether someone then alive was the same man as some man who had died before the Last Day; the problem seems to me to be that there *is* such a criterion and (given certain facts about the present age) it would, of necessity, yield the result that many men who have died our own lifetime and earlier will not be found among those who live *after* the Last Day.

Let us consider an analogy. Suppose a certain monastery claims to have in its possession a manuscript written in St. Augustine’s own hand. And suppose the monks of this monastery further claim that this manuscript was burned by Arians in the year 457. It would im-

mediately occur to me to ask how *this* manuscript, the one I can touch, could be the very manuscript that was burned in 457. Suppose their answer to this question is that God miraculously recreated Augustine's manuscript in 458. I should respond to this answer as follows: the deed it describes seems quite impossible, even as an accomplishment of omnipotence. God certainly might have created a perfect duplicate of the original manuscript, but it would not be *that* one; its earliest moment of existence would have been after Augustine's death; it would never have known the impress of his hand; it would not have been a part of the furniture of the world when he was alive; and so on.

Now suppose our monks were to reply by simply asserting that the manuscript now in their possession *did* know the impress of Augustine's hand; that it *was* a part of the furniture of the world when the Saint was alive; that when God recreated or restored it, He (as an indispensable component of accomplishing this task) saw to it that the object He produced had all these properties.

I confess I should not know what to make of this. I should have to tell the monks that I did not see how what they believed could *possibly* be true. They might of course reply that their belief is a mystery, that God had *some* way of restoring the lost manuscript, but that the procedure surpasses human understanding. Now I am sometimes willing to accept such answers; for example, in the case of the doctrine of the Trinity. But there are cases in which I would never accept such an answer. For example, if there were a religion that claimed that God had created two adjacent mountains without thereby bringing into existence an intermediate valley, I should regard any attempt to defend this doctrine as a "mystery" as so much whistle-talk. After all, I can hardly expect to be able to understand the Divine Nature; but I do understand mountains and valleys. And I understand manuscripts, too. I understand them sufficiently well to be quite confident that the monks' story is impossible. Still, I wish to be reasonable. I admit that one can be mistaken about conceptual truth and falsehood. I know from experience that a proposition that *seems* to force itself irresistibly upon the mind as a conceptual truth can turn out to be false. (If I had been alive in 1890, I should doubtless have regarded the Galilean Law of the Addition of Velocities and the Unrestricted Comprehension Principle in set theory as obvious conceptual truths.) Being reasonable, therefore, I am willing to listen to any

argument the monks might have for the conclusion that what they believe is possible. Most arguments for the conclusion that a certain proposition is possibly true take the form of a story that (the arguer hopes) the person to whom the argument is addressed will accept as possible, and which (the arguer attempts to show) entails the proposition whose modal status is in question.

Can such a story be told about the manuscript of Augustine? Suppose one of the monks is, in a very loose sense, an Aristotelian. He tells the following story (a version of a very popular tale): "Augustine's manuscript consisted of a certain 'parcel' of matter upon which a certain form had been impressed. It ceased to exist when this parcel of matter was radically deformed. To recreate it, God needed only to collect the matter (in modern terms, the atoms) that once composed it and reimpress that form upon it (in modern terms, cause these atoms to stand to one another in the same spatial and chemical relationships they previously stood in)."

This story is defective. The manuscript God creates in the story is not the manuscript that was destroyed, since the various atoms that compose the tracings of ink on its surface occupy their present positions not as a result of Augustine's activity but of God's. Thus what we have is not a manuscript in Augustine's hand. (Strictly speaking, it is not even a *manuscript*.) (Compare the following conversation: "Is that the house of blocks your daughter built this morning?" "No, I built this one after I accidentally knocked hers down. I put all the blocks just where she did, though. Don't tell her.")

I think the philosophical problems that arise in connection with the burned manuscript of St. Augustine are very like the problems that arise in connection with the doctrine of the Resurrection. If a man should be totally destroyed, then it is very hard to see how any man who comes into existence thereafter could be the *same* man. And I say this not because I have no criterion of identity I can employ in such cases, but because I have a criterion of identity for men and it is, or *seems* to be, violated. And the popular quasi-Aristotelian story which is often supposed to establish the conceptual possibility of God's restoring to existence a man who has been totally destroyed does not lead me to think that I have got the wrong criterion or that I am misapplying the right one. The popular story, of course, is the story according to which God collects the atoms that once composed a certain man and restores them to the positions they

occupied relative to one another when that man was alive; thereby (the story-teller contends) God restores the man himself. But this story, it seems to me, does not “work.” The atoms of which I am composed occupy at each instant the positions they do because of the operations of certain processes within me (those processes that, taken collectively, constitute my being alive). Even when I become a corpse—provided I decay slowly and am not, say, cremated—the atoms that compose me will occupy the positions relative to one another that they do occupy *largely* because of the processes of life that *used* to go on within me: or this will be the case for at least some short period. Thus a former corpse in which the processes of life have been “started up again” may well be the very man who was once before alive, provided the processes of dissolution did not progress too far while he was a corpse. But if a man does not simply die but is totally destroyed (as in the case of cremation) then *he* can never be reconstituted, for the causal chain has been irrevocably broken. If God collects the atoms that used to constitute that man and “re-assembles” them, they will occupy the positions relative to one another they occupy because of God’s miracle and not because of the operation of the natural processes that, taken collectively, were the life of that man. (I should also be willing to defend the following theses: the thing such an action of God’s would produce would not be a member of our species and would not speak a language or have memories of any sort, though, of course, he—or *it*—would *appear* to have these features.)

This much is analogous to the case of the burned manuscript. Possibly no one will find what I have said very convincing unless he thinks very much like me. Let me offer three arguments against an “Aristotelian” account of the Resurrection that have no analogues in the case of the manuscript, and which will perhaps be more convincing to the generality of philosophers. Arguments (a) and (b) are *ad homines*, directed against Christians who might be inclined towards the “Aristotelian” theory. Argument (c) attempts to show that the “Aristotelian” theory has an impossible consequence.

a. The atoms of which I am composed cannot be destroyed by burning or the natural processes of decay; but they *can* be destroyed, as can atomic nuclei and even subatomic particles. (Or so it would seem: the principles for identity through time for subatomic particles are very hazy; physical theory has little if anything to say on the sub-

ject.) If, in order to raise a man on the Day of Judgment, God had to collect the “building blocks”—atoms, neutrons, or what have you—of which that man had once been composed, then a wicked man could hope to escape God’s wrath by seeing to it that all his “building blocks” were destroyed. But according to Christian theology, such a hope is senseless. Thus, unless the nature of the ultimate constituents of matter is different from what it appears to be, the “Aristotelian” theory is inimical to a central point of Christian theology.

b. The atoms (or what have you) of which I am composed may very well have been parts of other people at some time in the past. Thus, if the “Aristotelian” theory is true, there could be a problem on the day of resurrection about *who* is resurrected. In fact, if that theory were true, a wicked man who had read his Aquinas might hope to escape punishment in the age to come by becoming a lifelong cannibal. But again, the possibility of such a hope cannot be admitted by any Christian.

c. It is possible that none of the atoms that are now parts of me were parts of me when I was ten years old. It is therefore possible that God could collect all the atoms that were parts of me when I was ten, without destroying me, and restore them to the positions they occupied relative to one another in 1952. If the “Aristotelian” theory were correct, this action would be sufficient for the creation of a boy who could truly say, “I am Peter van Inwagen.” In fact, he and I could stand facing one another and each say truly to the other, “I am you.” But this is conceptually impossible, and, therefore, the “Aristotelian” theory is *not* correct.

No story other than our “Aristotelian” story about how it might be that a man who was totally destroyed could live again seems even superficially plausible. I conclude that my initial judgment is correct and that it is absolutely impossible, even as an accomplishment of God, that a man who has been burned to ashes or been eaten by worms should ever live again. What follows from this about the Christian hope of resurrection? Very little of any interest, I think. All that follows is that if Christianity is true, then what I earlier called “certain facts about the present age” are *not* facts.

It is part of the Christian faith that all men who share in the sin of Adam must die. What does it mean to say that I must die? Just this: that one day I shall be composed entirely of non-living matter; that is, I shall be a corpse. It is not part of the Christian faith that I must at

any time be totally annihilated or disintegrate. (One might note that Christ, whose story is supposed to provide the archetype for the story of each man's resurrection, became a corpse but did not, even in His human nature, cease to exist.) It is of course true that men apparently cease to exist: those who are cremated, for example. But it contradicts nothing in the creeds to suppose that this is not what really happens, and that God preserves our corpses contrary to all appearance. (Here, I note with satisfaction, I am in substantial agreement with Professor Quinn.) Perhaps at the moment of each man's death, God removes his corpse and replaces it with a simulacrum which is what is burned or rots. Or perhaps God is not quite so wholesale as this: perhaps He removes for "safekeeping" only the "core person"—the brain and central nervous system—or even some special part of it. These are details.

I take it that this story shows that the resurrection is a feat an almighty being *could* accomplish. I think this is the *only* way such a being could accomplish it. Perhaps I'm wrong, but that's of little importance. What *is* important is that God can accomplish it this way or some other. Of course one might wonder *why* God would go such lengths to make it look as if most people not only die but pass into complete nothingness. This is a difficult question. I think it can be given a plausible answer, but not apart from a discussion of the nature of religious belief. I will say just this. If corpses inexplicably disappeared no matter how carefully they were guarded, or inexplicably refused to decay and were miraculously resistant to the most persistent and ingenious attempts to destroy them, then we should be living in a world in which observable events that were *obviously* miraculous, *obviously* due to the intervention of a power beyond Nature, happened with monotonous regularity. In such a world we should all believe in the supernatural: its existence would be the best explanation for the observed phenomena. If Christianity is true, God wants us to believe in the supernatural. But experience shows us that, if there is a God, He does not do what He very well *could* do: provide us with a ceaseless torrent of public, undeniable evidence of a power outside the natural order. And perhaps it is not hard to think of good reasons for such a policy.

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