

## **What is so good about having a body?**

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In Religion and Human Nature,<sup>1</sup> the third volume of his impressive comparison of the beliefs of major religious traditions, Keith Ward draws our attention to the different attitudes of Western religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam) and Eastern religions (most Hindu and Buddhist traditions) to embodiment here and hereafter. For Western religions the human body is a good thing - in need of discipline certainly to keep bodily desires under control (e.g. fasting for temporary periods) - but something which makes for the fullness of our humanity, and something with which we shall be re-endowed after death in the General Resurrection. (On most Christian views there is a temporary period between death and resurrection when most humans will have only their essential part, their soul). For Eastern religions the body is a prison in which we are shut in this life, but from which eventually (maybe after many re-embodiments) we may hope to be liberated. The Eastern view is not always expressed as the view that we shall survive without our bodies as individual persons - for some Eastern thinkers, we shall be merged into some greater spiritual whole - but when it is expressed in the former way, it does entail the view that on Earth humans have two separable parts - body and soul - and the soul is the essential part of the human person.

I believe that the Western view also entails this. For even if there is no intermediate period between death and resurrection, the issue arises as to what will constitute some future person being me rather than someone else. The new body being made of reassembled atoms of the old body? But many of these may have come to form some other body<sup>2</sup> or have been turned into energy; and there is no difference between energy formed from one chunk of matter and the energy formed from another.<sup>3</sup> The future person having my apparent<sup>4</sup> memories and character? But innumerable future persons could have my apparent memories and character. You may think that God will ensure that only one future person will have my apparent memories and character. But such an act of God cannot make a future person me - preventing similar people from existing cannot make any difference to who I am. So in my view a future person will only be me if he has as his essential part, my immaterial soul which was linked previously to my former body. And if that soul is linked to a new body, that body will be my body in virtue of that link (irrespective of whether or not the new body is made largely of

bits of the old body). In my view substance dualism - that humans on Earth have these two parts, of which the soul is the essential part (whose continuing makes for my continuing) - is unavoidable for purely philosophical reasons having nothing to do with the demands of theology. I do not, however, seek to re-argue<sup>5</sup> here this highly controversial view. Rather, I presuppose it and ask whether, if it is correct - if we need only souls in order to exist - and if it is a good thing that we should survive death as individual persons, God is doing us a favour if he gives us bodies as well, on Earth and in another life. What is the point of embodiment?

To have a body in the way that we humans on Earth have bodies seems to me to involve four things - it is to have a (normally moveable) public region of basic control, a (normally moveable) public region of basic perception - regions through which we are tied down to acting and perceiving, and a public machine room necessary for our actions and perceptions, which is also the source of our desires. By a public region I mean a region whose condition is in principle equally accessible to others as well as to ourselves. My heart and my brain are public regions, because if I know about their states better than others, that is only a contingent matter. Others can devise ways of finding out the state of my brain just as well as I can.

By the public region of my basic control I mean that region, goings-on in which I can affect just by choosing to do so, by my causally basic actions. Moving parts of our bodies are the causally most basic public actions which we can do. When I do A intentionally and intend thereby to cause some effect, bringing about which constitutes doing B, doing A is causally more basic than doing B.<sup>6</sup> I take the book off the shelf by grasping it and pulling it towards me; grasping and pulling it cause it to come off the shelf. The latter, like the former, are public intentional actions in the sense that (although they include a private part - my intending), they consist in bringing about a public state of affairs. But I do not grasp the book or pull it towards me by intentionally doing anything else public. Things have to happen in my body if I am to do the public actions - various neural impulses have to travel from my brain to my arms, mouth etc. But though my intending may cause these neural impulses, I do not intentionally bring them about (they are not what I am seeking to bring about), nor normally will I know much about them. What I do as a basic intentional action is to move a part of my body. Thereby I often seek to produce and succeed in producing more distant effects. By the sentence I utter I change your beliefs; by the motion of my arm I push the door open. Whether my efforts to produce more distant effects succeed depends on nature, the world beyond my body. The most I can do is to move my body. My intentional bringing about of the distant effect is a non-basic or

mediated action, which I do by doing the basic action - moving my hand or saying the words.

My body is that region which I control most immediately and by which I seek to control other things. My body is also the public region containing the sense organs by whose operation I learn about the world; because of their operation I have a region of basic perception surrounding my body. Only through light from distant objects impinging on my eyes, and sound waves impinging on my ears do I learn about the world. After the waves impinge, various things about which I am not likely to know very much, have to happen in my body if I am to acquire beliefs about the world. I call the public region about which I acquire knowledge by the use of my sense organs, but not by inference from other knowledge provided by my sense organs, my region of basic perception. When children first come to acquire knowledge by means of their sense organs, the region of their basic perception is the region of a few metres surrounding their bodies, in so far as their line of vision is unimpeded by solid objects. The region of basic perception being larger than the region of basic control we can learn about distant effects of our actions within the former region and thus learn to do this rather than that non-basic action.

Since among the basic intentional actions we can perform (unless we are paralysed) are to move our bodies, we can readily change the region of our basic perception, and thus learn about yet more distant effects of our actions and causes of our perceptions. Seeing people and other things damaged by falling stones in different places, I can infer that if I throw a stone over a wall it will hurt anyone on the other side of the wall, even though the other side of the wall is outside my region of basic perception. And having seen furniture arranged in a room in a certain way, I find that when I look through a telescope at the room from a long distance away, I observe an image of the furniture arranged in just that way; and so I learn to infer from an image in a telescope to what is happening, even when the latter lies outside my region of basic perception. What starts as an inference becomes so natural as to become an intentional action (to hurt anyone there may be on the other side of the wall) or a perception (of the arrangement of furniture in a distant room). My perception is a non-basic or mediated perception, because I perceive the distant event by perceiving the nearer event, in the sense that my perception of the distant event has the same sensory content (patterns of colour in my visual field, or noises heard) as my perception of the nearer event. Telescopes, radio and e-mail are means by which we have learnt to extend the range of our non-basic actions and perceptions by a large degree.

Then my body is the machine room which translates my intentions into bodily actions, and turns the incoming light, sound

etc., waves into sensations and beliefs about the external world. I need to look after my body (by providing it with food, drink, sleep, and exercise) in order that it may provide effective control and perception. My body is also the source of desires, (continuing over time, or stimulated by circumstances) to do and avoid various things. Many of our desires are for things conducive to our survival or that of our species - desires to eat, have sexual intercourse, or avoid dangerous heights, for example. The satisfaction of desire gives pleasure, and its frustration pain (in a wide sense). Prominent among the desires which may be frustrated are desires not to have certain sensations, e.g. those caused by bodily damage, and their frustration involves pain in a narrow sense.

Desires get reinforced by the memory of past pleasures and pains associated with various actions, and awareness thereof encourages us to do or avoid such actions in future - to drink wine again, or not to put our hand into the fire in future. My body is also so programmed genetically as to be susceptible to environmental influences leading to more sophisticated desires - for love and fame, power and fortune. Even if all our desires have good effects on some occasions, they operate when their fulfilment would not be a good thing - we desire to eat when we need food but also when we don't and others need the food instead, and so on. We have considerable natural proneness to wrongdoing, caused in part by our bodies.

Now what is the point of having a body of this kind on Earth? It is a great good that there should be beings with a free choice between good and evil, able to influence through their actions themselves, each other, lesser conscious beings, and the inanimate world. Given that to recognize some possible action as good involves having some minimal desire to do it, in the absence of bad desires, we will inevitably do what we believe to be good. We can only have a free choice between good and evil if we also have desires to do what (in the circumstances) is bad.<sup>7</sup> A proneness to wrongdoing is a necessary condition of a free choice between good and evil. It is good that we should have serious responsibility for others, and so for how it goes with others for good or ill to be up to us; and so that we should have the choice of harming as well as benefitting them (all of this within limits - there needs to be a limit to the amount of harm we can do to others). But doing bad is bad and so it is good that we should have the choice of making ourselves persons so naturally inclined to the good that we have no temptation to do evil; or alternatively, to make ourselves so that we are subject to no desires and cease to be moral beings. (Only with the latter possibility available to us will our final destiny be really in our own hands, and not depend on the prior choice of some superior power).

All of this requires us to have bodies in my sense of public regions of basic control and perception, and a machine room

necessary for our actions and perceptions and the source of our desires. To have a choice at all I need some power over and knowledge of a region. My region of basic control will have to be different from that of other people if I am to control it - if many other people could make my arms or mouth move, I wouldn't have any control. And my regions of basic control and perception will need to be limited if I am to have the choice of whether or not to extend them. To have the opportunity to extend my power and knowledge, there must be something I can do with them to extend their range. To choose to gain new knowledge, I must choose to exercise my basic powers - especially of motion (to get new bits of information from other places); and also of inference. New knowledge by discovery and/or inference of what follows what enables me to extend my powers by producing an event of the former kind in order to produce an event of the latter kind. With a region of basic control and perception, so long as it is placed in a world of natural laws sufficiently simple for us to discover and manipulate, we can choose whether or not to extend our knowledge and control.

Each of us could have his or her own regions of control and perception, not located in a common public world. But we could not have serious responsibility for others unless their regions belonged to the same world as ours; above all we could not cooperate with others to help someone achieve extension of knowledge and control, or to hinder such extensions. All this requires belonging to a common world - requires that our regions of control and perception should be public. And public communication also requires this. If I am to communicate with you (or have the choice of not doing so), there has to be something which I can do which will show you what I believe and desire. If we produce public effects (movements or noises), that allows others to interpret them as having certain meanings. Others seek the simplest system of beliefs and desires which will explain why we produce these movements in these circumstances, beliefs and desires as similar to their own as can be postulated. A natural very simple such assumption is that we are seeking by our movements and noises to say something which we believe to be true; and by supposing that, others can come to understand what we are saying - if they so choose. But if others are to have some choice of understanding or not, there must be the possibility of their refusing to hear what I have to say (e.g. by moving away) and of different languages or amending old languages so as to convey new ideas. Then others can choose whether or not to work out what we are getting at - or not to bother.

In order for me or others to have the choice of causing pleasure or pain to me, curing or maiming me, we must all have access to my machine room. By taking drugs I can give myself pleasure, by sticking a needle into me you can cause me pain. You

can limit my powers by cutting off my arm; but if I get ill or am maimed, surgeons and other doctors can intervene to repair me. You can help me extend my powers to perform basic actions by helping me to run faster; or give me drugs to improve my vision or memory. The ability to hurt others requires that their machine rooms are not too easily moveable by them, at any rate in unpredictable ways. I cannot hurt a poltergeist if I cannot hold it down. And again, the possibility of collaboration in benefitting or harming each other requires that the machine room be public.

Although the desires, good and bad, which we need for significant choice, need not arise from our bodies; if they do, there is again the possibility of others in collaboration influencing them for good or ill. Others can give us drugs to help control our cravings (for nicotine or heroin), or allow us to be educated in circumstances which will stimulate our latent desires for fame and fortune.

For all of these reasons it is good for us to have some sort of embodiment. There can be different degrees and ways of embodiment. We could be embodied in some of these respects and not others - we might have a region of basic control but be able to perceive what is happening everywhere; or our machine room could be located somewhere quite other than within our region of basic perception.<sup>8</sup> Our familiar three-dimensional physical space is a suitable space for our embodiment, but other kinds of 'space' might suit.<sup>9</sup> The bodies we have are spatially extended (occupy a volume of space) and not merely spatially located (at a point); and the powers which our machine rooms give us result from the machine room containing many separate and sometimes replaceable bits. To have that sort of machine room is an obvious way in which we can be publicly tamperable-with. But our machine room could consist of a simple particle, so long as there were different things we could do to it which would make different differences to our mechanisms of control, perception, and desire production.

So we need a body on Earth if we are to have the sorts of choices between good and evil which it is good that we should have. But suppose as a result of our choosing the good with such determination on Earth that we make ourselves so naturally good that we no longer have the choice of evil; and God takes us to his 'nearer presence' where we are always fully conscious of his loving care. Would we need bodies then?<sup>10</sup> Not if Heaven consists solely of the 'flight of the alone to the alone'. But surely it is good that people should cooperate in doing good; and the Heaven of the Blessed as depicted in the last book of the Bible and in much Christian liturgy and piety is a place where the saints do things together - above all worship God and help to forward his purposes. That minimally

requires a public presence. And while the Blessed have no temptation to do evil, there is no reason to suppose that they lack free will (any more than God does) to choose between innumerable alternative good things - and these good things may include giving each other pleasure and helping each other to extend their powers and knowledge in various ways. And for these purposes they need a public presence - a place from which they can extend their power and knowledge, speak and hear, and a machine room which can be stimulated to provide different kinds of pleasure and good desire. No doubt the Blessed love all the other Blessed (and all humans on Earth as well), but the expression of love requires recognition of particular individuals and their particular characteristics. A can express his or her love and affection for B only by singling out B from the rest of the Blessed, and that requires there to be a place at which A's action (e.g. of hugging or kissing or kind words) will affect B alone, an action which must involve a recognition of the way in which B differs from the rest of the Blessed - by her past and her interests; and so one which involves words and actions appropriate to that difference. And again the Heaven of the Blessed as depicted in Christian liturgy and piety is not one in which the Blessed forget their past or lose their interests - it is represented as full of 'patron saints' interacting with humans on Earth having particular interests and concerns. But cannot all this be achieved if the saints have telepathetic access to each other? One might imagine each saint having a large mental screen in which he could reach another saint by concentrating on a particular point on that screen, and be reached by another saint through (for example) that point getting much bigger on his visual screen. But such points taken together would constitute a public space; and once we fill out the details of how the Blessed access each other and what they can do to each other and to us, this system of powers and liabilities associated with each individual will constitute a system of bodies. For to have a body is, as we have seen, in the main just to have a system of powers and liabilities (including ability to communicate), accessible to others and alterable gradually (but not immediately) by ourselves and others. Only through bodies can finite beings have meaningful personal relations with each other. But such relations do not require having bodies which are a source of desires to do bad as well. So we might expect the Blessed to have bodies, but ones somewhat different from our present bodies.

That the Blessed in Heaven will have bodies after the General Resurrection, but bodies freed from many earthly limitations, especially by way of causing pain or malfunctioning, has been the universal Christian view. St. Paul wrote of the resurrected human body as a 'spiritual body'.<sup>11</sup> But if the above arguments are correct, and the Blessed in Heaven are already able to cooperate in worship

and so on (as is normally supposed in Christian liturgy and piety), it follows that they must already be embodied - which is contrary to the normal Christian view that (with the occasional possible exception, such as Mary) the Blessed are only re-endowed with their bodies at the General Resurrection. Some qualification is therefore required to the latter normal Christian view. We will need to say that they are embodied, but not fully (they don't have all of what is involved in having a body) or not with any of the matter of their original bodies until the General Resurrection.

God, however, being essentially omnipotent in his control and omniscient in his perception, cannot be tied down to a region in which he operates and through which he acquires knowledge. Nor can he have a machine room, for his abilities depend on nothing. But just one of the reasons which make it good for us to have bodies make it good that God should have a body in a very limited sense. While God will inevitably be aware of what we seek to say to him, we will only be aware of what he seeks to say to us publicly (that is, many of us together) if there is a public region under his direct control, whose states and changes of state we can interpret. In this sense the world is God's body. It is by the way he controls it - both by the normal operation of natural laws and by his occasional intervention in their operation - that he reveals his purposes to us communally. But God is not tied down to operating through this world - he could reveal his purposes to others through another world, or not reveal them at all.

It is possible, however, for God voluntarily to acquire a smaller body in a much fuller sense, which he uses (for as long as he chooses) as a mode of action and knowledge acquisition additional to his normal mode. That, the Council of Chalcedon taught, is what happened when God the Son became incarnate in Jesus Christ, acquiring a human body (and also a "rational soul").<sup>12</sup> Thereby he could produce effects (e.g. make a door close), which he could also produce by bringing them about as a basic action; and learn things (e.g. by seeing them) which he would be learning anyway, just by their happening. And this human body had a machine room, as a result of which others could cause pain to God Incarnate or give him food which would keep that body alive. And plausibly Christ's body was the source of many of the bad desires, that is temptations, to which Christ was subject - for example, the temptation to turn stones into bread.<sup>13</sup> Lesser councils have implied that this union of God the Son with human nature, body and soul, is a permanent one.<sup>14</sup> This could be a way in which after this life God continues to express his solidarity with his human creation.

It has also been a Christian doctrine, emphasised by St. Paul, that the Church is "the body of Christ";<sup>15</sup> the Church's "members" are the parts of this body. This body is naturally thought of as an



extension of Christ's human post-Resurrection body. This means, at least perhaps, that Christ moves the members of the Church as his basic actions, learns things through our learning them (as well as perceiving them anyway), feels pain when things go wrong with the members and pleasure then they go well. Our human bodies do not always do what we try to make them do - our arms and legs and stomach may not work properly. But they remain parts of our body if they have a potentiality for working as we want them to work. So, too, with members of the Church only partly open to the influence of its Head. And it is, of course, good that God in Christ should have a Church body, because that means that we are used by him as the vehicle by which he transforms the world; but good too that it is up to our free choice how well it works.

Whether for humans on Earth, or humans in Heaven, or God himself, embodiment (of different degrees) makes possible cooperation in interaction.

## NOTES

1. Keith Ward, Religion and Human Nature (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998).
2. Patristic and medieval theologians worried about the problem of the cannibal who eats only human flesh. How could both he and his victims rise again? In Summa Contra Gentiles 4.81.13 Aquinas gives the answer that in this case the human flesh will constitute the risen body 'of him to whose perfection it belongs more intimately' and 'if something was present in both [of two humans], it will rise in him in whom it was the first time'. This idea that some parts of the body are more central than others to the essence of the person is espoused also by the many modern writers who claim that it is identity of brains which constitute the identity of human persons. But this view, whether in the form espoused by Aquinas or that espoused by modern writers, has the consequence that if the cannibal's most 'central part' is made from the atoms of the 'central parts' of other humans, they cannot all reacquire bodies. Aquinas's view entails that it is the cannibal who cannot rise again.
3. It may be that fundamental particles (and so the atoms which they compose) have 'thisness', e.g. there is an intrinsic difference between two electrons which have all the same properties of mass, charge etc. In that case I suppose that God could recreate the atoms constituting our previous bodies, which had been turned into energy. However, in my view and perhaps in the view of the majority of philosophers and physicists who have given thought to this issue, fundamental particles probably do not have thisness. (See my 'Thisness', Australasian Journal of Philosophy, 73 (1995), 389-400). In that case there would be no intrinsic difference between qualitatively similar bodies composed of the same number of the

same kinds of fundamental particles arranged in the same way. But a body could not be mine just because God omitted to create a qualitatively similar one.

4. By someone having my 'apparent memories' I mean it seeming to them that they did and experienced the things which I did and experienced. Only if they really did and experienced these things would they be me.
5. See my The Evolution of the Soul (Oxford: Clarendon Press, revised edition, 1997), especially Part II.
6. The distinction between basic and non-basic actions is due (under that name) to A. C. Danto. (See his 'Basic Actions', American Philosophical Quarterly 2 (1965), 141-8). The more precise definition of causally basic action is due to Annette Baier - see her 'The Search for Basic Actions', American Philosophical Quarterly 8(1971), 161-70.
7. I have argued this more fully in many places, see for example my Responsibility and Atonement, Clarendon Press, 1989, pp. 43-48.
8. As in Daniel Dennett's amusing paper 'Where Am I?', in his Brainstorms, Harvester Press, 1979.
9. P. F. Strawson brought out the inadequacies of a purely auditory space in his Individuals, Methuen, 1959, ch. 2.
10. For reasons of space, I shall not discuss the issue of whether the damned in Hell, if there are any, need bodies. For my general view on the fates of different groups in the after-life, see my Responsibility and Atonement, especially ch. 12.
11. I Corinthians 15.44.
12. H. Denzinger, Enchiridion Symbolorum, Herder, 1963, § 301.
13. Matthew 4.3
14. For example, the Lateran Council of A.D. 649 implies this in stating that at the Last Judgment Christ will come to judge 'the living and the dead', 'in the flesh and rational soul which were assumed by him'. Denzinger § 502.
15. I Corinthians 12.27.