

Personal Identity and the Jehovah's Witness View of the Resurrection

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Abstract:

It is commonly known that the Watchtower Society (Jehovah's Witnesses) espouses a materialist view of human beings, denying the existence of a substantial soul. This leads them to hold as well that at the point of physical death, the human "soul" (the self or life-force) sleeps—that is, it ceases to exist. Nevertheless, Jehovah's Witnesses believe that at the end of history human beings will be bodily resurrected. Presumably, they believe that the individuals who are resurrected are the same persons who died. In this paper, I intend to challenge this presumption. More specifically, I will question the coherence of the Watchtower's view of resurrection given their materialist view of human persons. In what follows, I will first rehearse the relevant aspects of the Jehovah's Witness (JW) view of human nature and bodily resurrection, providing supporting documentation. Then I will lay out the major theories of personal identity open to the materialist and show that none of these can provide the JW with a coherent account of bodily resurrection given their peculiar views of personhood and the general resurrection.

The Jehovah's Witness View of Man and Resurrection

Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly teach not only a materialist conception of human beings, but also that human beings cease to exist at the point of physical death. Appealing to God's words to Adam in Genesis 3:19 ("For dust you are and to dust you will return"), as well as other texts, one well-known JW book states that "the dead cannot do anything or feel anything. . . . At death man's spirit, his life-force, . . . 'goes out'. It no longer exists."¹ The same work later reiterates that "when a person is dead he is completely out of existence. He is not conscious of anything."² Another JW work elaborates:

A man might say that his dog ‘lost its life’ when it was hit by a truck. Does mean that this animal’s life left the body and continued existing? No, he is simply using a figure of speech indicating that the animal died. The same is true when we speak of a man as ‘losing his life.’ We do not mean that his life exists independently of the body. Similarly, ‘to lose one’s soul’ means ‘to lose one’s life as a soul’ and carries no meaning of continued existence after death.³

Elsewhere, we read, “The Bible clearly teaches that the dead are unconscious and lifeless in the grave”⁴ and that at the point of death “the life force eventually leaves all the body cells and the body begins to decay. All conscious thought and actions end.”⁵

It is clear from these and other references that the official teaching of the Watchtower Society is that death results in the (temporary) extinction of the human person. The person once alive no longer exists. This belief is closely connected with and is explained by the JW view of human nature. In the book *Let God Be True*, we are told:

Man is a combination of two things, namely, the ‘dust of the ground’ and the ‘breath of life.’ The combining of these two things (or factors) produce a living soul or creature called man. . . . So we see that the claim of religionists that man has an immortal soul and therefore differs from the beast is not scriptural.”⁶

Another work asks, “Are you, in effect, two persons in one—a human body with a brain, heart, eyes, ear, tongue, and so forth, but also having within you an invisible spiritual person completely separate from your fleshly organism and that is called the ‘soul’?”⁷ The answer comes in the negative: “There should be no question in the mind of any sincere investigator that what the Bible speaks of as ‘soul’ is not some immortal part of man that continues conscious existence after death.”⁸

So, it is clear that JWs are committed to a materialist view of human constitution. Human beings are physical entities who literally cease to exist at the point of physical death. Of course, JWs also believe

that these material beings will be bodily resurrected on the day of judgment: “The Holy Scriptures assure us that the dead in general will live again. . . . Jehovah God has empowered His Son Jesus Christ to resurrect them.”⁹ Elsewhere, the Watchtower Society asserts that after death, some of those who were saved by God “receive a resurrection to heavenly glory as spirit creatures, even as did Jesus Christ. . . . However, the vast majority of mankind will be brought back to enjoy life on a restored earthly paradise.”¹⁰ To such people Jesus “gives a new physical body.”¹¹ The resurrection is thus a *bodily* resurrection.

However, another significant point is that the Watchtower authorities who developed this view of human nature and resurrection were aware that human bodies, even while alive, undergo constant change. And at death the atoms that compose any particular body are dispersed widely. So, the question is asked, “Will God have to reassemble all the atoms that once formed their bodies so that their bodies are identical in every respect to what they were at the moment of death?”¹² The Watchtower answers with a firm (and wise) “no.” Why? Because:

it would not be reasonable to insist that precisely the same atoms be regathered to form their restored body. After death, and through the process of decay, the human body is converted into other organic chemicals. These may be absorbed by plants, and people may eat these plants or their fruit. Thus the atomic elements making up the deceased person can eventually come to be in other people. Obviously, at the time of the resurrection the identical atoms cannot be reassembled in every person brought back from the dead.¹³

The Watchtower Society rightly recognizes that a bodily resurrection cannot involve the reassembly of the numerically identical atoms that composed a person’s body at the point of death. They take this to mean (rightly or wrongly) that God cannot resurrect the same body. Thus, he must give the person resurrected “a *new* physical body.” This conviction influences the JW view of personhood. Since God cannot resurrect the body that died, what is “brought back to life

[is] the same *person*.”¹⁴ But what is meant by “person” here? The JW has a specific answer to this question as we will see in the next section.

But let’s pause and take stock. What we have seen so far is that the Watchtower Society is committed to four doctrinal points: (1) human beings are purely physical or material organisms, (2) at death those organisms cease to exist, (3) there will be a future day in which some of those persons who once existed will be raised bodily from the dead, and (4) they will be raised not as the same bodies that died, but as new ones. Notice, then, that the JW clearly envisions a *temporal gap*—a period of time—between death and resurrection. This is the crucial point, coupled with his particular view of human personhood to be discussed below, that will prove problematic for the Watchtower Society. What I will argue is that this combination of beliefs, on at least their specified definition of personhood, is incoherent.

Personal Identity and Resurrection

What makes a person the numerically same person from one moment to the next? This is the question of *personal identity*. It is a metaphysical question about what (if anything) constitutes continuity of personhood through time. And there have been many different answers given to this question.

One simple and naïve answer is that personal identity is constituted by *sameness of body*, where sameness of body is understood as the body’s having and maintaining the same physical parts from one moment to the next. To my knowledge, no philosopher holds this view. Even the JW sees that this view is untenable. The reason, as we have seen, is that the body undergoes constant change. The atoms that compose the body at any time t_1 are numerically different at any later time t_2 . In fact, about every seven years or so the body is composed of completely different atoms than it had seven years prior.

The traditional Christian answer to the question is given by *substance dualism*. The substance dualist believes that human beings are composed of two distinct components, two substances: body and soul. The body is a material substance that undergoes constant change as it gains and loses atoms (and even smaller particles, such

as gluon, quarks, and so on). The soul is an immaterial substance that causally interacts with the body and that remains constant and unchanging as a substance throughout all bodily changes. According to substance dualism, personal identity is determined by sameness of soul. Regardless of the changes in my body, on substance dualism, I am still the same person, or substantial self, at t_2 as I was at t_1 because at both times (and every time in between) I have (or am) the same soul.

Substance dualism, if true, also makes unproblematic a bodily resurrection after death and a temporal gap. For the substance dualist believes that the soul (and thus personal identity) survives the death of the body and exists in a disembodied state between death and resurrection. At the point of resurrection, the soul is reunited with the reconstituted body. There is no difficulty here in terms of identity believing that the person who is raised is numerically identical to the person who died. Of course, this view of personal identity and resurrection is not open to the JW because he or she explicitly denies the existence of an immaterial soul that survives the death of the body. Whatever view of personal identity and resurrection the JW espouses, it will have to be one consistent with a materialist view of human personhood.

Laying aside the obviously incorrect sameness-of-body view mentioned above, what other options are open to a materialist like the JW? One possible option is the view of Christian materialist Peter van Inwagen. His is a version of the causal continuity view that I'll call the *living system view*. Van Inwagen understands that personal identity cannot be constituted by sameness of body (since the body constantly changes), but he nevertheless believes that personal identity is closely associated with sameness of body. How so? For van Inwagen sameness of body and personal identity are properties of living organisms which are systems of physical parts (atoms) organized and integrated into a single, continuous life. Though the human body is continuously in flux, losing and gaining new atoms, those atoms are "caught up" in the biological activity of a single living organism that persists through time. In van Inwagen's words, "The life of an animal is a kind of storm of atoms that is constantly, and very rapidly, changing its 'membership.'"¹⁵

Let us suppose, though it may be doubted,¹⁶ that van Inwagen's view provides an adequate account of personal identity. What about the resurrection? Van Inwagen himself believes that the doctrine of resurrection is compatible with the living systems view of personal identity only if there are no temporal gaps between death and resurrection. The reason is that the possibility of "gappy" existence is highly suspect. Imagine a human being named Fred. If a living system like Fred dies and ceases to exist completely, then what would happen on the day of resurrection? God apparently would gather together a collection of atoms and reconfigure them in the qualitatively same structure and activity that comprised Fred's life before he died. In other words, God would recreate the storm of atoms that once was Fred. But why should we consider this recreated organism to be Fred rather than merely a duplicate of Fred? For us to have any reason to think that this "new" Fred is numerically identical to the old Fred, there would seem to have to be some kind of causal connection between the first storm of atoms and the second. After all, it was (partly) the causal connections between the atoms that comprised Fred's "storm" while he was alive that constituted his personal identity in the first place. Without some causal continuity between the first Fred and the second Fred, there simply is no basis on this view for their numerical identity.

For his part, van Inwagen solves the problem by denying an absolute temporal gap between death and resurrection. In what has to be one of the strangest (perhaps bravest) moves in the philosophy of religion, van Inwagen suggests that perhaps when a person dies, God secretly preserves some relevant part of his brain intact—a crucial part of his "life storm"—and on the day of resurrection rebuilds a body around that identity-preserving core.¹⁷ Van Inwagen has gained very few followers for this theory. Nevertheless, we do have to acknowledge that it is at least logically possible. For our purposes here, all we need to recognize is that this view will not help the JW because the JW is committed to a "gappy" existence for the resurrected dead.

There are, however, some materialist views of personal identity that some philosophers think might allow for "gappy" existence and thus make coherent a materialist conception of resurrection. Dean Zimmerman, for example, has proposed a theory in which God, just prior to a person's death, causes that person's atoms to fission into two

distinct, though causally related paths. One set of the fissioned particles “remains behind” (so to speak) and composes a corpse. The other set of particles persist (or travel) through a temporal gap to the time of the resurrection where they are reassembled into a human person numerically identical to the person who’s atoms fissioned.¹⁸ The reason for thinking that the resurrected person is the same person is because (unlike the reassembly of Fred above) there is an apparent immanent causal connection between the “first” person and the “second.”

But, this theory, even if it works to make sense of personal identity and resurrection, will not work for the JW either. There are two reasons. One, the JW view of resurrection would seem to rule out any immanent causal connections between the body of the person that dies and the one who is raised. The JW emphatically insists that the dead person “no longer exists.” Moreover, his body doesn’t fission, but is “converted into other organic chemicals” that are “absorbed by plants” and “can eventually come to be in other people.” Further, the resurrected body is not, on their view, related causally to the original body such that it is reassembled according to causal properties placed in the fissioned atoms prior to death. Rather, God simply and miraculously creates a *new* body out of “whole cloth.”

A second reason the JW cannot use this theory (or any other we have cited) is that the Watchtower Society has explicitly stated a particular view of personal identity and its relation to resurrection. Here is one statement of their view:

And what makes an individual the person he is? Is it the chemical substance making up his body? No. . . . What really distinguishes him from other people, then, is his general physical appearance, his voice, his personality, his experiences, mental growth and memory. . . . The resurrected person will have the same memory that he had acquired during his lifetime and he will have the full awareness of that memory. The person will be able to identify himself, and those who knew him will also be able to do so.¹⁹

Though certain physical traits are mentioned here, it appears that memory is the primary criterion necessary for the survival of

personal identity at the resurrection. The same work goes on, however, to describe how God will store in his own memory a record of the “life patterns” of deceased people which includes their memories and other psychological traits. These life patterns are elsewhere described as “the personal life-long record of the creature built up by his thoughts and by the experiences in the life he has lived from certain habits, leanings, mental abilities, memory, and history. It is also the register of . . . one’s personality.”²⁰

What the Watchtower is espousing here is either John Locke’s memory view of personal identity or perhaps the “Soul-as-Information-Bearing-Pattern view” developed by John Polkinghorne.²¹ Each view suffers from serious problems. For one thing, both views suffer from the so-called “duplication problem.” Lynne Rudder Baker explains:

The problem is that two people (B and C, say) may both be psychologically continuous with (or run the same software, or exhibit the same information-bearing pattern) as a single earlier person, A. If B and C bear exactly the same relationship to A, and if B and C are distinct, then the relation that they both bear to A cannot be identity. A cannot be identical with two distinct objects, and it would be arbitrary to suppose that A is identical to one but not the other. . . . So, sameness of . . . memories, software, or information-bearing-patterns cannot suffice for sameness of person.²²

So, imagine a case in which God, on resurrection day, takes the “pattern” or memories of Fred that he has in his own memory and creates two new bodies that both have Fred’s “pattern” (and it seems evident that God could do this). Which is Fred? There is no clear answer. Indeed, this case gives us strong reason to believe that personal identity must include more than memory or psychological patterns as JWs claim.

Another reason to doubt the JW view of personal identity is something mentioned earlier. Their view, unlike some of the other possible materialist views, does not leave room for immanent causal connections between the person who dies and the person who is raised. The existence of the temporal gap between death and resurrection, for

them, is absolute. There is no physical, causal continuity that links the dead one to the resurrected one. And this is what seems to make it implausible or at least questionable that there is numerical personal identity at the resurrection.

Conclusion

I have argued that the Watchtower Society's materialist view of human persons (together with their specific view of personal identity) makes their belief in general resurrection implausible at best. Now one might wonder if this conclusion is all that significant. After all, their view of human persons and their view of the resurrection are not doctrines as central as their views on the Trinity and the deity of Christ. Granted. But insofar as the Watchtower Society claims to be a divinely inspired prophet, and insofar as their views sketched here are the official teaching of the organization, then this critique has the potential to contribute to undermining the authority of the Watchtower Society for those who might be willing to think about these issues.

Notes

1. *You Can Live Forever on Paradise Earth* (Brooklyn: Watchtower Bible and Track Society [hereafter WBTS], 1982), 77.
2. *Ibid.*, 88.
3. *Is This Life All there Is?* (Brooklyn: WBTS, 1974), 43.
4. *The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life* (Brooklyn: WBTS, 1968), 34.
5. *Ibid.*, 40.
6. *Let God Be True* (Brooklyn: WBTS, 1952), 68
7. *Is This Life All there Is?*, 35.
8. *Ibid.*, 47.
9. *Ibid.*, 167.
10. *The Truth that Leads to Eternal Life*, 45.
11. *You Can Live Forever on Paradise Earth*, 174.
12. *Is This Life All there Is?*, 170-71.
13. *Ibid.*, 171.
14. *Ibid.* (emphasis theirs).
15. Peter van Inwagen, *Metaphysics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1993), 177.

16. For example, all causal continuity views like van Inwagen's are subject to a "fission problem" in which a person splits into two different person streams or "storms of atoms" both of which are causally continuous with the original storm. One person, of course, cannot be numerically identical to two persons.
17. Peter van Inwagen, "The Possibility of Resurrection," in *The Possibility of Resurrection and Other Essays in Christian Apologetics* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998), 45-51.
18. Dean Zimmerman, "The Compatibility of Materialism and Survival: The 'Falling Elevator' Model," *Faith and Philosophy* 16:2 (April 1999): 194-212.
19. *Is This Life All there Is?*, 171-72.
20. *Make Sure of All Things* (Brooklyn: WBTS, 1953), 311.
21. John Polkinghorne, *The Faith of a Physicist: Reflections of a Bottom-Up Thinker* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996).
22. Lynne Rudder Baker, "Persons and the Metaphysics of Resurrection," *Religious Studies* 43:3 (2007): 333-48.