

Radical resurrection and divine commands

Eric T. Olson
University of Sheffield

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1. The problem

Heaven is a place where at least some of us go after we die. There we are said to live forever in the immediate presence of God. During our natural lives, God is distant: we cannot perceive him, or at least not in any obvious or direct way. Observant and intellectually honest people can be entirely unaware that there is any sort of divine being. But in Heaven it is no more possible to be unaware of the divine being than for someone standing in the Sahara desert on a summer's day to be unaware of the sun. Eternal life in heaven is considered the best possible state for a human being, and attaining it is the chief goal of Muslims, Christians, and many other religious people.

The doctrine of heaven raises many hard philosophical questions. For example: (1) Where exactly is this heaven? Why can't we see it in our telescopes, or travel there by rocket? (2) Is it really possible for us to live forever? Our nature as human beings makes us vulnerable to injury and illness, and it's only by a certain amount of good luck that we manage to survive even for a short time. Wouldn't our luck eventually run out? (3) Would it really be a good thing to live forever? Eternity is a long time. Wouldn't we eventually get bored? (4) What is it to be "in the immediate presence" of God? How does it differ from what believers take to be our current situation, in which God is present but not immediately present? And why does God not make himself immediately present to us now? (5) If not everyone gets to heaven, what happens to the rest of us? How is it right for some people to be permanently excluded from it?

The question I want to address is one that arises even if all these are answered: How could we ever *get* to heaven? In particular, how is it compatible with what happens to us when we die? Human beings, like other living things, are made of delicate and unstable materials, which need constant maintenance and renewal by biochemical processes so complex that even after decades of study, our understanding of them is radically incomplete. At the moment of death, these processes cease, and our remains immediately begin to decay and disperse. There is nothing we can do to stop this process: embalming, refrigeration, even cryonic preservation can only slow it down. In the end, nothing of our characteristic physical or psychological states will survive--not even bones or fossil remains. Wait long enough and there will be only dust: atoms scattered at random across the void. Nothing about their nature and arrangement could enable anyone to deduce that they once made up living beings.

In other words, death is followed by *total destruction*. I use this phrase in a technical sense: though we may say that the World Trade Center was “totally destroyed” in 2001, it was not totally destroyed in my sense, since enough structure remained to enable a civil engineer to get a fair idea of what the buildings were once like. *Your* remains, though, will eventually decay to the point where they are not even the recognizable ruins of a human being. You will be like a sandcastle washed away by the tide.

And once something has been totally destroyed, it looks impossible for it ever to exist again. We could build another sandcastle like yesterday’s, but we cannot rebuild the same one. Take the example of the Colossus of Rhodes: an enormous statue that once stood at the harbor of that ancient Greek city. It was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world until it collapsed in an earthquake in 226 BC. Afterwards the iron and bronze it was made from were sold for scrap and melted down. Today the Colossus no longer exists. It hasn’t merely been transformed from a solid object to a sort of thin cloud scattered across the earth’s surface. (That could only be a nerdy joke.) The atoms remain, but the statue itself has long since passed out of existence.

Is it now possible, given what has happened, for the Colossus to come back into being? Could it be restored? Imagine that the owners of a Las Vegas hotel claim to have rebuilt it. If the result of their efforts were enough like the original, would it actually *be* the ancient statue? Would they have in their possession a genuine historic artifact--an object cast thousands of years ago in the foundries of ancient Rhodes? Could the modern-day Greeks rightly say that it was theirs and demand it back?

It doesn’t seem so. The hoteliers could create *a* Colossus, so to speak--an exemplar of the original design, like a particular copy of a book. But it could never be the very physical object that once stood in Rhodes, no matter how much it may resemble it. It would be a thing built by 21st-century craftsmen, not be a thing built by ancient Greeks. It would be at best a marvelously accurate replica. Given that the original was totally destroyed, no amount of reconstruction can bring it back. If enough large pieces still existed, so that much of the structure that made the statue what it was remained intact, there might be room for debate about whether the result of repairing and reassembling them would be the original or a replica. As things are, however, the case is closed. History has ruled out the possibility of rebuilding the Colossus.

But what about God? Couldn’t *he* do it? He could certainly create an object exactly as the Colossus was at any point during its existence, copying it so perfectly that no one could tell the difference. He could even gather up all the statue’s original atoms and arrange them as they were when it stood in Rhodes. In other words, he could do everything the Las Vegas hoteliers could do only infinitely better. But even he could do nothing more than that. If there is nothing the hoteliers could do to restore the original Colossus, then there is nothing God could do either. The result of God’s act would be

merely an even more accurate reconstruction. So it seems, anyway. And if God cannot bring the Colossus back, nothing can.

And to all appearances, what happens to us differs from what happened to the Colossus only in detail. The difference between being eaten by worms and being melted down has no metaphysical significance. If the Colossus cannot get from Rhodes to Las Vegas given what has happened since its demise, then we can no more get from earth to heaven given what happens in the grave.

2. The soul

But appearances can be misleading. It could be that we are not totally destroyed in the grave. What happens to us when we die might be radically unlike what happened to the ancient Colossus.

How could this be? It's clear that something decays and disperses when we die. Death leaves behind lifeless remains, which are totally destroyed. But perhaps they are not really our remains--or at least not the whole of them. In that case their demise need not mean our own total destruction.

The best-known account of this sort holds that each of us has an immaterial and nonphysical part: an object immune to the decay and dissolution that afflict biological organisms. So although our physical remains are totally destroyed, this special object survives intact, and can make its way to heaven.

Now the mere fact that some part of you got to heaven would not suffice to get *you* there. Your carbon atoms never decay, and one of them might not only continue after your death, but become part of a human being living in Shanghai. Yet that would not get you to Shanghai. And this is not merely because carbon atoms are material things: if you had immaterial atoms in addition to the material ones, their presence in Shanghai would not get you there either.

If the survival of this part is to ensure our own survival, it must have some special status, beyond simply being immaterial. Its continued existence must somehow enable us to be conscious and to remember our natural lives after our other remains are destroyed. (There's no point in getting to heaven unconscious.) The usual view is that this special part *is* the thing that is conscious and remembers. My special part is the author of these words. It uses my body as a tool to write them down. Your special part is now reading and pondering them. At death this special part becomes disembodied: owing to the dispersal of our matter, there ceases to be a material object moving according to its will and supplying it with sensory information. But it continues to be conscious and to remember the events of its natural life. And as long as your special part survives, you survive. Where it goes, you go. The ancient Greeks called this thing the soul.

This view has been endorsed by many great historical thinkers, and has a vast following among religious believers today (Swinburne 1997 is a detailed contemporary defense). We might call it the *Platonic theory* of life after

death, after one of its early advocates. If this could be the case, then it is possible for us to get to heaven. Today's philosophers are divided about its possibility. But there is wide agreement that, possible or not, it is very unlikely to be the case. Virtually all the evidence supports the opposite conclusion.

Consider the fact that physical changes can affect mental functioning (van Inwagen 1993: 178-180). If a thinking, conscious being were wholly immaterial, we should expect damage to its body to disrupt its ability to interact with that object, much as damage to a remote-control aircraft can affect our ability to control it. A blow to the head might make us unable to move or to perceive anything. But the soul would be undamaged, and so ought to continue functioning and remain fully conscious. Yet that's not what happens: damage to the brain, or general anaesthesia, knocks you out cold. If such a minor alteration to your brain invariably causes unconsciousness, how could you remain fully conscious when your brain is totally destroyed? We also know that differences in the brain are systematically correlated with differences in cognitive and perceptual abilities, alertness, mood, memory, and other mental phenomena. The simplest explanation of these facts is that mental activities are physical processes in the brain. It's not what we should expect if they were nonphysical processes in the soul.

Platonism appears to imply that in life, the soul cannot work without a healthy body, but after death, with no body at all, it actually works *better*. Perhaps damage to the brain interferes with the soul's functioning in something like the way that a strong magnetic field might interfere with the workings of a delicate instrument. A defective brain is a sort of kryptonite for the soul. That's why removing the soul from the body altogether (whatever that might mean) improves its functioning. But this is an extravagant explanation of the dependence of the mental on the physical, compared to saying simply that thought takes place in the brain.

3. Body snatching

Here is another way in which we could be spared total destruction: At the moment of death, God might fetch us away to heaven, whole and in bodily form--healing us in the process so that we arrive in good health (van Inwagen 1978: 120f.).

In some ways this would resemble the biblical stories of Jesus and Elijah physically ascending into Heaven. But there are important differences. For one thing, those departures were supposed to be visible to others, yet we never see people rising from their deathbeds and shooting skyward (if that's the right direction). So part of the story must be that something prevents us from seeing these events. But God could arrange that easily enough.

Another difference is that Jesus and Elijah vanished without a trace, whereas death leaves a corpse. Where would it come from if you were fetched away whole? It couldn't be you. It could not even be composed of

the matter that made you up when you died: that matter would continue to compose you in heaven. The corpse would have to be a sort of counterfeit, miraculously created out of nothing and put in your place. That way its decay would not destroy you. And something would have to prevent us from observing this replacement as well. God would create the appearance that a living being dies and is then totally destroyed, while in reality it is carried off intact and instantly replaced by something else, which we burn or bury.

Call this the *body-snatching theory* of life after death. It has the significant advantage of not requiring an immaterial soul. There is no metaphysical mystery about it, or at least none beyond those concerning the existence of God and heaven. Think of the sandcastle again. *It* could have been invisibly fetched away intact and replaced with a replica, so that only the replica was destroyed. That would enable it to survive the incoming tide, despite appearances to the contrary.

The main objections to body snatching are theological. The problem is not that the story is incoherent or incompatible with known facts, but that it sits uneasily with the religious convictions of those who actually believe in heaven. For example, it requires there to be a continuous path through space and time from this world to the next one. Heaven would have to lie at a certain distance from here, in a certain direction--sharpening the question of why we can't see or visit it. (Platonists can avoid the worry by denying that heaven has any spatial location at all, seeing as its denizens are immaterial.)

And of course the story requires God to engage in systematic deception. After blinding us to the departure of the dead, he must replace them with fakes that we cannot help but take to be their genuine remains. It would mean that God had deliberately arranged things so that we are not merely ignorant about the physical process of death, but profoundly mistaken. Why should he want to fool us in this way?

4. The reassembly theory

We have been asking how it might be possible for us to get to heaven despite the total destruction awaiting us in the grave. One answer, we have seen, is that we are not in fact totally destroyed. Though something that looks like you decays, you yourself, or some part of you, survives undamaged. But a more daring answer is that we can get to heaven despite being totally destroyed. What happens in the grave is no illusion. No immaterial soul remains intact. We really are like sandcastles in the waves. Yet that need not be the end: impossible though it may seem, God could still recreate us in heaven. Call this *radical resurrection*.

How might it be accomplished? If you have died and only dust remains, what could God do to make you appear, alive and well, in heaven?

You might think he need only gather up your original atoms from the four corners of the earth, transport them to heaven, and arrange them there as they were when you were alive. The result would be not merely someone

just like you, but you yourself. Death may disperse our atoms, but God can recreate us by reassembling them, just as a jeweler can reassemble a watch taken apart for repair. As long as the original atoms remain, total destruction need not be final and irreversible. Call this the *reassembly theory*. It seems to imply that reassembling the atoms of *any* long-destroyed object would recreate that very thing and not a replica. If we had the atoms, the technology, and the original blueprints, we could even rebuild the original Colossus. Total destruction would be an enormous practical obstacle to a thing's restoration, but not an absolutely insuperable one.

But it's hard to take the reassembly theory seriously.¹ One worry is that it requires a continuous spacetime path from this world to the next, just as body-snatching does. Another is that our atoms or even elementary particles are not indestructible, suggesting that we could prevent someone from reaching heaven by annihilating them. In that case not even God could restore that person by reassembly.

A further awkward fact is that each of us contains atoms that once belonged to others. The most spectacular example of this is cannibalism, but in fact it is commonplace. When our atoms disperse, they are taken up by plants and enter the food chain (a process expressed in the phrase "pushing up daisies"). As a consequence, each of us contains vast numbers of atoms once belonging to people long dead. If *all* our atoms had to be reassembled in heaven, few of us could get there. And it's no good supposing that only some of the atoms are needed--more than half, say. The longer there are human beings on earth, the greater will be the proportion of their atoms that were once parts of others. If our species survives long enough, every one of our descendants' atoms will once have been someone else's. That will prevent those descendants from being reassembled in heaven: their atoms will all be needed to reassemble the people previously composed of them.²

Many will object to these consequences on theological grounds. But it's doubtful whether the story is even possible. It requires God to reassemble your original atoms in heaven. Yet there are no such things as "your original atoms": there are only the atoms making you up at a given moment during your life. You are constantly taking in new atoms and expelling old ones through eating, breathing, excretion, and so on. Very few of your current atoms were parts of you a year ago. You need not retain any of them in order to exist at a later time on earth. Why should it be needed for you to exist in heaven?

Retaining the same atoms is not only unnecessary for you to survive, but insufficient as well. By an extraordinary coincidence, someone living on

¹Most of the following points are well known, and can be found in van Inwagen 1978 and elsewhere.

²Or at least the dead could not all be resurrected at once. Those composed of atoms that previously belonged to others cannot be reassembled until those others have shed them in the process of metabolic turnover.

earth a thousand years from now could be made up at some moment of precisely the atoms now composing you. They could even be arranged in the same way. For that instant, she would be physically and (we may suppose) mentally just as you are now. But clearly she would not be you. This would not be a case of resurrection. She would have existed long before she contained any of your atoms, and the remainder of her life would probably be quite unlike yours. Yet the reassembly theory implies that she would be you. (And if she were composed ten years later of the atoms now composing your mother, she would be your mother too.)

Or suppose God gathered up and reassembled the atoms that composed you on your fifth birthday, creating a child in heaven with apparent memories of your first years, and simultaneously did the same with the atoms making you up now. The reassembly theory appears to imply that both resulting people, the child and the adult, would be you. Yet they would be two different people: the population of heaven would increase by two, not one, as a result of God's work. So you would be one and the same as two distinct beings, which is impossible: if x and y are one and x and z are one, y and z cannot be two.

So God cannot resurrect you by reassembling your atoms. Does this mean that the supposedly repaired watch you collect from the jeweler's is not your original watch, but a new one? If God can't reassemble a human being by putting her atoms back together, how could anything ever be reassembled? But of course a watch taken apart on the jeweler's bench is not totally destroyed. Most of its characteristic structure is preserved. Otherwise there would be no difference between reassembling a watch and manufacturing a new one from raw materials. A watchmaker could examine the heap of gears, wheels, and springs and tell you not only that they once composed a watch, but what sort of watch it was. If the watch really were totally destroyed--melted down, say--no one would say that we could still repair it by reassembling the atoms. The atoms composing a human being are not like the gears of a watch. There is no "natural" way of putting them together. They are more like the grains of sand in a sandcastle. And when death has done its work, we shall be just as thoroughly annihilated.

5. The *Star Trek* theory

It cannot be necessary for you to be composed of your original atoms in heaven, since you don't retain the same atoms from day to day on earth. Suppose we do away with that requirement, then. Let God take *any* atoms of the appropriate sorts and quantities and arrange them in heaven as yours are arranged now. Wouldn't the resulting person be you?

This thought resembles the story of the "transporter" in the television series *Star Trek*. When the Captain has had enough adventures on the alien planet, he radios the Starship Enterprise and says, "Beam me up!" He then vanishes, and shortly afterwards a man looking and acting just like him appears on board the ship. Everyone takes him to be the Captain.

The technology of the transporter is a closely guarded industrial secret, but suppose it works like this: First it “scans” the Captain, recording his complete physical state. This process scatters his atoms, vaporizing him. The information recorded in the scan is then sent to the ship--by radio because that’s quickest, though the effect would be the same if it were written down and sent by mail. There it is used to arrange new atoms just as the Captain's were when he made his request.

If such a device really could move the Captain from the planet to the ship, then it would be possible for us get to heaven even if we have been totally destroyed. God could note how your atoms are arranged at the appropriate moment during your life. (Set aside the difficult question of when that moment would be--one that arises equally on the reassembly theory.) When you die, your atoms disperse in the usual way. Later on, God could use the information he gathered earlier to arrange new atoms in heaven as yours were at that earlier time. (Or he might configure a superior grade of heavenly matter in an analogous way.) The result would be someone both physically and mentally just like you were then (or near enough). And that person really would be you, just as the man who steps out of the transporter in the TV show is the Captain.

The *Star Trek* theory, as we might call this, would solve some of the problems facing the reassembly theory. (Readers can work out which ones it wouldn’t solve.) But it has plenty of problems of its own. We can see one by imagining a variant transporter device that scans the Captain without dispersing his atoms. For him it's like having an x-ray. The information thereby gathered is radioed to the ship and used there to arrange new atoms into a man just like the Captain, as before. The result is two men, one on the planet and one on the ship.

It should be clear that in this case the Captain stays where he is and the man appearing on the ship is a mere replica. Yet the *Star Trek* theory seems to imply the opposite: the man on the ship would be the Captain and the man remaining on the planet would be a replica. If the original transporter moves the Captain to the ship, the variant transporter should too. The difference in the two scanning techniques could hardly be relevant to whether the process moves someone from planet to ship. And of course the Captain cannot simultaneously move to the ship *and* stay where he is. (If the Captain and the man appearing on the ship were one, and the Captain and the man remaining on the planet were also one, then the man on the ship and the man on the planet would have to be one; yet there are two men at the end of the story.) So the man remaining on the planet after the scan could only be a newly created replica. And that is absurd. If nothing else, you can’t make a new man on the planet just by arranging different atoms on the ship. That would be like making a house in Kansas just by arranging bricks in Japan.

Here is a second problem for the *Star Trek* theory: it has the absurd implication that there is no difference between original objects and perfect

reproductions. We can see this by imagining that museums develop a machine that makes perfect copies of items in their collections-- reproductions so accurate that no amount of examination could distinguish them from the originals. No matter how perfect, they would still be reproductions. An object made by the machine yesterday could not be a drawing made by Rembrandt in 1650. Strictly speaking, it would not even be a drawing.

Now suppose that our Las Vegas hoteliers, keen to avoid conflict with the Greek Ministry for Antiquities, propose to build not the original Colossus, but a perfect replica of it. And as a gesture of good will they offer to rebuild the original in modern-day Rhodes. (The difference is important to the Greeks but not to the gamblers in Las Vegas.) It's certainly possible to make a perfect replica of the Colossus. The *Star Trek* theory would make it possible to restore the original statue as well. But how would the hoteliers make sure that they built the replica in Las Vegas and the original in Rhodes, and not the other way round? For that matter, how would they avoid building replicas in both places? What would they have to do differently to produce a copy rather than the original, or vice versa?

There is nothing they *could* do. On the *Star Trek* theory, the way to make a perfect replica is precisely the same as the way to restore the original object: gather up matter and arrange it as that of the original was. (It makes no difference whether it's the original atoms or new ones.) But if there is no difference in the procedure, how could there be a difference in the outcome? Of course, processes subject to chance--tossing a coin, for instance--can have different outcomes on different occasions. But this is not relevant to the *Star Trek* theory. If we build something just like the Colossus, it cannot be a matter of chance whether this produces the original or a replica, in the way that a tossed coin can land either heads or tails. If nothing else, that would allow both the object built in Las Vegas and the one built in Rhodes to be the original, just as two tossed coins can both land heads. And that is impossible. (Again, if the statue now in Las Vegas were the original statue and the statue now in Rhodes were also the original, then the statue now in Las Vegas would be the statue now in Rhodes. Yet two statues were built, not one.)

Likewise, the way for God to get you to heaven would be the same as the way for him to make a replica of you there, namely to arrange matter there just as yours was arranged at the appropriate moment during your life. So there could be no difference between your appearing in heaven yourself and a replica's appearing there. There would be no difference between being in heaven and not being in heaven: an unintelligible consequence.

So the transporter can do nothing more than produce a replica of the Captain, and God's arranging new atoms in heaven as yours were on earth can at best create a replica of you. Why, then, do *Star Trek* viewers accept that the Captain himself appears in the transporter room? Why don't we suppose that the machine destroys him and creates a mere replica, and that

all the characters are tragically deceived about the procedure? The answer has to do with the nature of fiction. We accept that people can be teleported because that's what the story tells us. In order to appreciate a work of fiction, we have to suspend our disbelief and go along with it. We don't worry about whether the events depicted are possible, any more than we worry about whether they ever actually happened. Or at least not unless they're so obviously impossible that we lose patience. And the idea that someone could be teleported is not *obviously* impossible. But many things are impossible in unobvious ways: if an episode of *Star Trek* had the Captain (or some other character) discovering the largest prime number, most viewers would go along with that too, despite the existence of a mathematical proof that there can be no such number. The mere fact that we accept something when it happens in fiction is no reason to suppose that it's in any sense possible.

6. Survival and causal connections

Suppose all this is right: The Las Vegas hoteliers cannot rebuild the original Colossus, even if they use the original atoms. The Captain remains on the planet in the transporter stories, and the man who materializes on the ship is a replica. And if someone were to create a being just like you right now in some distant place, you too would stay where you are, so that the one appearing there could be only a copy of you. You simply cannot move a thing from one place to another just by building something exactly like it in the new place. It follows that the reassembly and *Star Trek* theories are impossible. Arranging atoms in heaven could create a perfect replica of you--a brand-new person who falsely believed that she had lived on the earth. But it could never create you.

Why not? Why is replicating a thing's atomic structure, even with the original atoms, not enough to recreate that very thing? This is a deep metaphysical question, and I don't have a full answer. But it has at least partly to do with causal connections. In the variant-transporter story there are two candidates for being the Captain, so to speak: one on the planet and one on the ship. These men bear very different causal relations to him. The man on the planet gets his physical and mental character *directly* from the Captain: there could hardly be a closer causal connection between a thing as it is at one time and a thing as it is at another time than there is here. By contrast, the man who appears on the ship bears only a tenuous causal connection to the Captain. His existence and his physical and mental character derive from the Captain's only in a roundabout way that passes through the transporter's scanners, transmission and data-storage devices, and assembly modules. He exists only because of the workings of the machine, which could have created him even if the Captain had never existed. The fact that the man on the planet has the Captain's original atoms and the man on the ship is composed of entirely new ones is merely an effect of this difference in causal connections. That's why the

transporter does not move the Captain from the planet to the ship.

Why is the Las Vegas Colossus not the real thing? Again, at least part of the answer is that its existence and nature are not a direct result of the existence and nature of the original statue. It exists only because of the efforts of 21st-century builders, who could have created it even if the original Colossus had never existed.

This suggests a general principle: a thing existing today can still exist tomorrow only if its existence and character then are in some way a direct result of its existence and character today. In other words, a thing has to *cause itself* to continue existing. Your surviving is not something that other beings or outside forces can do for you. They can help--you wouldn't last long without air and food, and in some cases medical assistance. But they can't do all the work. You have to do at least some of it yourself. This need not require any intention or conscious effort on your part: stones, too, maintain themselves in being, in that their continued existence is not due entirely to outside forces.

There is more to be said about this principle, but if it's even roughly correct it is enough to rule out the reassembly and *Star Trek* theories. When God arranges matter in heaven as yours was at the appropriate point during your natural life, the resulting person exists entirely because of God's act. You haven't caused yourself, even partially and unwittingly, to exist in heaven. That prevents the one who appears there from being you.

This explains what happens in the stories of the Colossus and the variant transporter. It also supports a more general claim: Once a thing has been totally destroyed, like the Colossus of Rhodes or a sandcastle in the waves, it can never exist again. The most anyone could do is create a new thing just like it. It follows that if we really are totally destroyed in the grave, we cannot get to heaven. There could be beings in heaven who are exactly like us in all important respects, including our character and beliefs and preferences. They would appear to remember our natural lives just as well as we do. But they could no more be us than a statue built today in Las Vegas could be the original Colossus. The reason is that anything appearing after a thing's total destruction must be made entirely from scratch by someone or something else: God, the transporter, the Las Vegas hoteliers, or what have you. And when a thing is made from scratch, it can never be directly caused by the original thing. It has not in any way caused itself to exist at later times. For this reason it can never *be* the original. That appears to rule out radical resurrection.³

7. The divine-command theory

³Merricks (2009) and Zimmerman (1999, 2010) accept my claim about self-causation, but argue that radical resurrection is nevertheless possible. They say that someone can cause herself to exist in heaven despite being totally destroyed in the grave. Their claims raise large questions, and I cannot discuss them here.

Here is one more thought. I said that once someone has been totally destroyed, the most anyone could do, even God, is construct a new being just like the original. God can only do what the Las Vegas hoteliers might do, only better. But maybe he can do something different. Maybe he can make it the case that someone appearing in heaven is you or I by a simple act of will (Baker 2005: 386). He can say not merely, "Let there exist, at this time and place, someone just like Olson as he was at midnight GMT on Christmas day 2000." He can equally say, "Let *Olson* exist at this time and place in the condition he was in at midnight GMT on Christmas day 2000." And so it would be. God has the power to decide not only what sort of beings exist, but which particular beings. (Or at least he can do this if those beings have existed before.) No one else has this power. So although we could never bring back the Colossus or resurrect people long dead, God could.

The idea is that facts about identity over time--about whether beings existing later are or are not beings existing earlier--are up to God to decide. And these decisions are independent of other facts, to do with physical or psychological or causal continuity. God's decision could make it the case that someone existing at some time in the future was you without affecting anything else. He would not need to ensure that such a being was causally related to you in some way. His decision alone would suffice, no matter what may have happened to you in the meantime. Or maybe there are further constraints. It might be absolutely impossible for you to become a stone--not a magically conscious, intelligent stone, but an ordinary lump of granite. Maybe not even God's command could bring that about. If you could only exist as a person, you could not be resurrected as a stone. But that would not rule out your being resurrected as a person.

If God's decision could make a future being you without affecting anything else, presumably it could also make it the case, without affecting anything else, that a future being was *not* you. God could, if he wished, annihilate you at this moment and replace you with someone new, without any disruption of your mental or physical processes (so that no one, including you and your replacement, would notice that anything out of the ordinary had happened). What makes it the case that you are the person who read the previous sentence, rather than a newly created person just like him or her, is simply that God has so decided. He has not kept you in existence by ensuring that the physical and mental processes making up your life continue without interruption. That is irrelevant to your survival. He has done so just by deciding that the person now sitting in your chair is the person who read that earlier sentence.

This means that there are possible worlds where all the facts about mental and physical events and their causal and spatiotemporal relations to one another are the same, but the facts about who is who are completely different. There are worlds just like this one except that each person survives for only an hour and is then replaced by someone new. There are worlds just like this one except that you and I swap places right now: I

suddenly come to have your spatial, physical, and mental properties, thus becoming falsely convinced that I am you, and you likewise become just like me. And there are worlds just like this one except that you are Socrates reincarnated--not by having his soul or by somehow inheriting some of his character or memories, but solely because of God's decision.

If this were so, God could make it the case that we ourselves appear in heaven, rather than mere replicas of us, by *fiat*. If we human beings wanted one of us to exist at some time in the future, we'd have to prevent her from being totally destroyed. That's because we haven't got the power to create facts about identity over time without doing anything else. But God can do it. Call this the *divine-command theory* of resurrection.

Even if the divine-command theory were true, however, it would not help us to know whether we could have life after death. Even if God exists and is all-powerful, it does not follow that he could bring it about by an act of will that someone who is totally destroyed exists again. No claim about God's powers would make any difference to the debate over the possibility of radical resurrection. The reason is that in order to know whether God could bring about radical resurrection by *fiat*, we should have to know already, on other grounds, whether radical resurrection was possible and thus *could* be brought about. To suppose that radical resurrection must be possible because God could bring it about would be to assume the point at issue.

If something is absolutely impossible--if it simply could not happen--then it could not be brought about, even by an omnipotent being. Think of a round square: an object both round like a cylinder and square like a cube. It would have to have both the properties of a cube and the properties of a cylinder, and these properties are incompatible. Being square, it would have corners; being round, it would not have corners. Its very description is incoherent. Since a round square could not possibly exist, not even God could create one.

If it were possible for God to restore us after we are totally destroyed, it could only be because this, unlike the existence of a round square, is a possible state of affairs. So the divine-command theory presupposes that radical resurrection is intrinsically possible. But whether that is so is just what we were trying to find out. In order to know whether God's will could restore us after we are totally destroyed, we must know already whether radical resurrection is possible.

Or maybe, as Descartes thought, God can bring about any state of affairs whatever. He *can* create round squares. He could make it morally good--obligatory, even--to torture innocent children, and wicked to be kind or generous. He could even make it the case that he himself never existed. And if he could do these things, he could certainly bring us back into being after we have been totally destroyed. He could even bring us back as lumps of granite. In that case there would be no need to establish the possibility of radical resurrection before arguing that God could bring it about, because God's power would not be limited by antecedent possibility. We might call

this the *extreme* divine-command theory.

But it's doubtful whether even this would give us any rational hope of getting to heaven. Think of round squares again. Even if God had the power to create such things, we still ought to expect round objects not to have corners, and thus not to be square. In fact we could be certain of it. That a thing's having corners rules out its not having them is, we might say, a *law of thought*. Other such laws are that if something is the case, then it's not also not the case, and that everything is identical to itself. Without these laws, nothing would rule out anything. You could never infer one claim from another, since the first would always be compatible with the negation of the second. From the fact that Alice is a mother you could not infer that she is (or ever was) female, or that she has children, or even that she is a mother: there could be male, childless mothers who are not mothers. Reasoning would be impossible. Some states of affairs are simply unthinkable, in that accepting them would violate a law of thought--even if God nevertheless had the power to bring them about. And for all the extreme divine-command theory says, radical resurrection might also be unthinkable. It may be no more rational to believe that we might exist after being totally destroyed than to believe that the Town Hall could be both round and square.

8. The soul again

The prospects for radical resurrection are dim. Once we are totally destroyed, it simply does not seem possible for us to exist again, in heaven or anywhere else. Those hoping to reach heaven had better hope that the appearance of total destruction is an illusion--that despite what happens in the grave, we somehow remain at least partly intact. Given the repugnance of the body-snatching theory, it's unsurprising that so many continue to believe in an immaterial soul.⁴

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⁴Some of the material in this chapter is borrowed from Olson 2015. I thank Simon Cushing, Karsten Witt, and an anonymous reviewer for valuable comments on an earlier version.

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