The Person and the Corpse

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abstract

What happens to us when we die, if there is no afterlife? We might cease to exist, or continue existing as corpses. The view that we become corpses is hard to defend, because it makes it hard to say what our identity over time could consist in. The view that we cease to exist is little better: it seems to imply that there are no such things as corpses. A satisfying metaphysics of death is elusive.

1. The Person and the Corpse

The really big question about death is what happens to us when we die. If we had an oracle willing to answer just one philosophical question about death, this is the one most of us would ask. It may be that there is some sort of afterlife: we continue existing after death in a conscious state. But what if there is no afterlife? Then what?

We might simply cease to exist when we die. Death is the end of us. It is annihilation. But there is a third possibility, less dramatic and yet more unsettling: that one continues existing as a corpse after death. Unless it is unusually violent, death is simply the change from a living to a nonliving state. So what awaits us at the end of our lives is not annihilation, but decay and dissolution, and only when this process is far advanced do we cease to exist. Until then we are literally food for worms. If you don't like the sound of that, you can at least take comfort in the fact that you will be completely unconscious when it happens. Based on what we observe, this may seem the most likely answer to the really big question.

These alternatives--afterlife, annihilation, and persistence as a corpse--may not be exclusive. Perhaps we could cease to exist at death, yet somehow return to being later on. It may even be possible to become a corpse, rot away to nothing, and then be resurrected. I will not explore these suggestions.

This chapter is about whether the alternative to the afterlife is annihilation or the worms. Suppose for the sake of argument that there is no afterlife (or at least none beginning immediately after death). Suppose also that there really are such things as corpses: that the particles composing a human person normally continue to compose something after one's death. I mention this because some metaphysicians deny it: they say that when a person or any other organism dies peacefully, her particles cease to compose or make up any larger thing; thus,

strictly speaking there are no corpses, but merely particles "arranged corporeally".[1] This would rule out our becoming corpses. I will set it aside for now.

Assuming that there is no afterlife and that there really are corpses, our question is how the living person relates to her corpse. Are they one thing or two? Shall I one day be a corpse, just as I was once a child? Is the corpse that will issue from my death me, the author of this chapter? If death is annihilation, the answer is No: my corpse is something other than me. Nothing is ever first a living person and then a corpse. If death is the transition from a state of being alive to a state of being not alive, the answer is Yes: my corpse is me. The very thing that is first a living person is later a lifeless corpse.

For practical purposes, it may hardly matter which of these is the case. Few of us will have any real preference either way. But it makes a big difference to our nature and place in the world. If we did become corpses, it would mean that our fundamental nature is the same as that of brute material objects. Though we differ from sticks and stones in our mental and biological properties, these differences would be only temporary, and not woven into our inmost being. A human person would be nothing but a lump of matter that happens briefly to have some special abilities. Most of the great figures in the Western tradition, from Plato and Aristotle to Kant and Wittgenstein, would have found this absurd. It is also incompatible with the most popular contemporary views of personal identity, as we shall see. What if death were annihilation? Then it would be absolutely impossible for us to pass from a living to a nonliving state: we could not exist without being in some sense alive. This would be a sort of metaphysical vitalism. It would mean that we are either not material at all, or material things radically different in their metaphysical nature from sticks or stones. In this respect "annihilationism" resembles the doctrine of life after death.

2. Pluralism

It is easy to suspect that my question is somehow empty. Superficially, asking whether the person is her corpse is like asking whether the square root of 4489 is 63. Only two answers seem possible--Yes or No--and one must be true and the other false. Either the annihilationists are right and the "corpse survivalists" are mistaken, or it's the other way round. But you may think these two answers are equally right, and merely describe the same facts differently. The idea is not that the person and her corpse are neither definitely one nor definitely two: a case of vague identity. That would make both annihilationism and survivalism wrong: the only right answer to the question would be that the corpse is "sort of" identical to the person and "sort of" not. The thought, rather, is that you can say what you like. There is no possibility of mistake.

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[1] Van Inwagen 1990, Merricks 2001. Some things, the xs, compose something y if and only if each of the xs is a part of y, no two of the xs share a part, and every part of y shares a part with one or more of the xs.

The simplest way to make sense of this view, if not the only way, is something like this:

> Whether your corpse is you depends on what we mean by 'you'. There is a being that has the physical and mental properties we attribute to you in life, and which goes on existing as a corpse afterwards. There is another such being that comes to an end when you die. We might call the first the corporeal person and the second the psychological person. The corporeal person becomes a corpse at death; the psychological person is annihilated. If by 'you' we mean the corporeal person, then you are the corpse; if we mean the psychological person, then you're not. But it is pointless to ask which of these beings is "really" you, Both are equally good candidates for the office. And that's all there is to say about how you relate to your corpse. If we find the question difficult, that is only because it is unclear whether it asks about the corporeal person or the psychological person. Make the question determinate and the answer is obvious.

Call this pluralism (Sider 2001 is a good example). It implies that those who appear to disagree about whether people become corpses are simply talking about different things: some about corporeal people, others about psychological people. The only real disagreement is about words--about which beings the word 'person', and personal pronouns and proper names, typically refer to.

Pluralism will strike some as nothing but good healthy common sense. But the assumption that there are two good candidates for being you--two conscious, intelligent beings now sitting in your chair and reading--is a contentious piece of metaphysics, and it is reasonable to ask why we should accept it. For that matter, the pluralist will need to say whether all questions about our identity over time are indeterminate in this way. Suppose we ask whether you will survive the act of reading this chapter. Does pluralism imply that one reader will cease to exist on finishing the chapter and another will survive, and that it is pointless to ask which is really you? If so, there are far more than two intelligent beings sitting there. If not, we shall want to know what makes the two cases different.

The most familiar version of pluralism is the ontology of temporal parts or "four-dimensionalism", which in its usual form implies that every matter-filled region of spacetime, no matter how arbitrary, contains a material thing. This (assuming that we ourselves are material) gives us a corporeal person, a psychological person, a being that comes to an end when it finishes this chapter, and a vast number of further intelligent beings, all sitting in your chair and reading this. On this view, our question about the person and the corpse would have a determinate answer only in the unlikely event that our personal pronouns and associated expressions always refer to corporeal people and never to psychological people, or vice versa. I will set aside pluralism until §13.

3. Speaking of the Dead

I turn now to proposals for answering our question.

Some say that our ordinary thought and talk about death presuppose that people exist as corpses after they die (Feldman 2000: 101-3). For instance, we call a human corpse a dead person. And what is a dead person, if not something that was once a living person? This is not to say that a dead person is a person who is dead--that to be a dead person at a given time is to be at once a person and dead. The phrase 'dead person' may be like the phrase 'former student'. But nothing can be a dead person without at least having been a person. It follows that the person comes to be a corpse.

Or consider this children's riddle: Who's buried in Grant's Tomb? The answer, of course, is Grant--not Grant's corpse. (It's funny if you're eight.) And the riddle asks not what, but who is buried there. Again, we say such things as "I want to be buried next to my partner", and not "I want my corpse to be buried next to my partner's corpse". We say that many famous people are buried in Highgate Cemetery. All this seems to presuppose that when we bury someone's corpse, we bury him or her. But to bury the person and to bury his corpse is not to bury two things: we don't say that Grant and his corpse are both buried in Grant's Tomb. To bury someone's corpse is to bury that person. Once more it follows that the corpse is the person.

The claim is that annihilationism conflicts with something we are all committed to because it is assumed in our ordinary thought and talk. It implies that nearly everyone is mistaken about one of the most elementary facts concerning death. And although such mistakes are possible, this is not a charge one ought to make without strong evidence.

This reasoning seems to me to have no force at all. For one thing, if the ordinary saying that many people are buried in cemeteries implied that people become corpses, it would also imply that there is no afterlife (or at least none that begins at death): you can't be both rotting in the grave and at the same time enjoying the life of the world to come. But our willingness to say such things is hardly reason for doubt about the afterlife. It would be absurd to argue: "The belief in life after death conflicts with the ordinary statement that many people are buried in cemeteries. The belief therefore implies that nearly everyone is mistaken about death, a charge that no one ought to make without strong evidence." For that matter, those who believe in the afterlife are no less inclined than the rest of us to say that people are buried in cemeteries.

And if our ordinary sayings about death implied that people become corpses, they would imply things that no one believes. If Grant had been dead so long that his tomb contained only dust, it would be no less proper to say that he is buried there. If this statement implied that Grant really is there in the tomb, it would imply that some beings who were once living people are now piles of dust. Yet no one

(well, almost no one) accepts that.

This might show that people simply have inconsistent beliefs about death. I would prefer to be cautious about drawing metaphysical conclusions from ordinary talk: I doubt whether the saying that Grant is buried where his remains are presupposes that those remains are Grant, rather than simply that they are his remains. But either way the burial argument is undermined.

What about the saying that a dead person is something that was once a living person? I think it implies only that a dead person is the immediate result of a living person's death. It is like the saying that a demolished house is something that was once an intact house. Someone staring disconsolately at a smoldering pile of ashes might say, "That was once my house." This statement hardly implies that some one thing is first a house and later a pile of ashes. For all ordinary language tells us, the relation between the person and the corpse may be no different.

4. The Person/Body Argument

Here is another argument based on ordinary thought and talk, this time for the opposite conclusion. A corpse is a dead body. More precisely, Ben's corpse is Ben's dead body. What makes it Ben's dead body is that it was once his living body. So a person's corpse is the thing that is his body when he is alive. It follows that we become corpses only if we are our bodies. But clearly we're not. Ben's body does not read the Guardian. You can't have a conversation with Ben's body. (Not literally, anyway.) If people became corpses, it would follow that people's bodies really do read newspapers and have conversations, that Aristotle's body was the greatest philosopher of antiquity, and so on, which is absurd. Therefore people are not their corpses.

The argument has three main premises: (1) When a person is alive, there is a thing that is his body; (2) the thing that is a person's body when he is alive is the thing that is his corpse when he is dead; and (3) people are not their bodies. I am willing to concede the first premise, and I will discuss something like the second later. Let us consider the third.

That Ben is one thing and his body is another is supposed to follow from the fact that there are certain expressions we can properly attach to the term 'Ben' but not to the term 'Ben's body' (or vice versa), such as 'reads the Guardian'. This is taken to imply that there is something true of Ben that is not true of his body, or that Ben has a property that his body lacks (or vice versa), in which case they can't be the same thing. The inference assumes that we can derive many of the properties of people and their bodies from the sorts of expressions we can attach to the terms 'Ben' and 'Ben's body' in ordinary language.

Can we? Here are some things we can say in ordinary circumstances:

Ben reads the Guardian.
Ben is six feet tall.

Ben weighs 170 pounds.
Ben's body is healthy/diseased.
Ben's body is made up primarily of water and proteins.
Ben's body has a surface area of 1.7 square meters.

And here are some things we cannot ordinarily say:

*Ben's body reads the Guardian.
*Ben's body is six feet tall.
*Ben's body weighs 170 pounds.
*Ben's body has the flu.
*Ben is made up primarily of water and proteins.
*Ben has a surface area of 1.7 square meters.

Whatever interest these patterns of usage may have for linguists, it is doubtful whether they offer any metaphysical insight. Otherwise we should have to take seriously the idea that people have height and weight but no surface area, while our bodies have the opposite pattern of properties, and that human bodies can be healthy or diseased but cannot have any specific illness such as flu.

If the absurdity of saying that Ben's body reads the Guardian is not due to the fact that Ben's body is something that doesn't read, where does it come from? Maybe we use the phrase 'Ben's body' to refer to Ben when we want to ascribe properties of a certain "brute physical" sort to him, difficult though it is to characterize this sort. To say that Ben's body is reading, then, would be to say that Ben is reading, with the implicature that reading is a brute physical property. In that case the statement may be strictly true, but defective owing to a false implicature. In any event, the difference in the way we use the terms 'Ben' and 'Ben's body' is unlikely to tell us whether people become corpses.

5. The Essentialism Argument

The arguments we have considered so far were based on ordinary thought and talk. Let us turn now to arguments with metaphysical premises. First an argument for annihilationism.

Each of us is essentially a person: nothing that is in fact a human person could have existed without being a person. And a person is by definition something with certain mental properties--that is, to be a person at a time is to have those properties at that time. (This definition is not meant to be tendentious. If you like, consider it a stipulative definition of the technical term 'psychological person'.) These mental properties might be rationality and self-consciousness, or what have you. But whatever they are, a corpse hasn't got them. So nothing can be at once a corpse and a person. It follows that if you were to become a corpse, you would exist for a time without being a person then--which, as you are a person essentially,

is impossible. Thus, we do not come to be corpses.[2]

The claim that each of us is essentially a (psychological) person--person essentialism--is no truism or deliverance of common sense, and its implications go far beyond the claim that we don't become corpses. It entails, for instance, that I was never a fetus: a fetus, early in its gestation at least, is no more a psychological person than a corpse is. Person essentialism is a claim in need of argument. But it's hard to find any argument that amounts to more than an invitation to find it intuitively compelling (see for instance Baker 2000: 220).

6. The Psychological-Continuity Argument

A similar argument turns on the claim that some sort of psychological continuity is necessary for us to persist through time. Suppose there is a being existing at another time: a child, an old woman, a fetus, a corpse, or what have you. How would that being have to relate to you, as you are now, for it to be you? Many answer that it would be you only if it were then psychologically continuous, in some way, with you as you are now--that is, only if its mental states then were causally related in a special way to the mental states you are in now. For instance, you remember reading the previous sentence. The reading causes the memory, presumably by laying down traces in your brain, making you psychologically continuous, now, with one who did the reading. And you now relate to yourself as you are at more distant times by chains of such direct psychological connections. If no past or future being could be you without then being psychologically related in this way to you as you are now, you could not become a corpse. Because a corpse, when it is a corpse, has no mental properties at all, it cannot then be psychologically continuous with you, and so cannot be you.

Is the psychological-continuity requirement true? The literature abounds with arguments for the claim that some sort of psychological continuity is sufficient for us to persist. For instance, if we imagine your brain transplanted into my head, it is easy to conclude that the resulting being would be you because he would be psychologically continuous with you. (I don't say that this conclusion is true, only that it is easy.) But such arguments cannot show that psychological continuity is necessary for us to persist. And this claim is far less attractive. If Fred lapses into an irreversible vegetative state, where his mentality is completely destroyed but his life-sustaining functions continue so that the resulting being can breathe on its own and remain biologically alive for many years, his loved ones don't normally conclude that he has ceased to exist, and that the living being in the hospital bed was never a person. Nor does lack of psychological continuity lead many of us to deny that we were ever fetuses.

That said, the view that psychological continuity is sufficient but not necessary for us to persist is an awkward one. Think of the brain transplant again. The empty-

[2] That each of us is a person essentially appears to play a central role in an argument of Rosenberg's against our becoming corpses (1998: 47-51).

headed being left behind after your brain is transplanted could be biologically alive, and you would relate to it much as Fred relates to the human vegetable. If Fred is the vegetable, then whatever makes that the case ought to make you the empty-headed being. In that case you would not be the one who got your brain, despite his psychological continuity with you. So the claim that you would go with your transplanted brain, if true, supports annihilationism. The psychological-continuity argument has some force.

7. The Dead-Animal Argument

Here is a popular argument in support of corpse survivalism (Ayers 1991: 216-28, 278-92, Mackie 1999; see also Williams 1973: 74, Thomson 1997: 202): We are animals--organisms of the animal kingdom. And when an animal dies peacefully, it comes to be a dead animal--a corpse. It follows that we come to be corpses.

If an animal normally comes to be a corpse when it dies, then the question is whether we are animals. If we are, we become corpses. If we're not, presumably we don't: no one thinks that we are nonanimals that persist through death as corpses.

Are we animals? The psychological-continuity argument (as well as the essentialism argument) would imply that we're not. You can't move an animal from one head to another by transplanting its brain. If we could move you from one head to another by transplanting your brain, you cannot be an animal.

Here is an argument for our being animals (Olson 2003): There is a human animal located where you are. Because it has a working brain and is otherwise physically identical to you, we should expect that animal to be conscious and intelligent. In fact it ought to be psychologically just like you. How, then, could it be anything other than you? That would mean that there were two conscious, intelligent beings sitting there and reading this, you and and the animal. Worse still, it would be hard to see how you could ever know which of the two conscious beings you are. If you think you're the one that isn't the animal, then the animal too would seem to believe, mistakenly, that it is the nonanimal; and it would be in the same epistemic situation with respect to its belief as you are with respect to yours. So even if you really were something other than the animal you see when you look in the mirror, you could never have any grounds for believing it. The obvious way to avoid these awkward conclusions is to accept that we are animals.

8. Animals and Corpses

Rather than argue about whether we are animals, I will devote the remainder of this chapter to the question of whether animals become corpses when they die, and hence whether we become corpses if we are animals. (Again, if we're not animals, it's clear enough that we don't become corpses.) However, some of my arguments will be relevant to the view that we are not animals as well.

Why suppose that an animal becomes a corpse when it dies? One might appeal once more to ordinary language (Feldman 1992: 34, 93-5). For instance, we call a corpse a dead animal; and a dead animal, surely, is something that was once a live animal. Fishmongers boast that their herring were caught that very morning--when, of course, they were alive. And so on.

But ordinary talk about dead animals is no more metaphysically transparent than ordinary talk about dead people. Suppose a museum exhibits a dinosaur skeleton dug up in the Gobi desert. In any ordinary context, the claim that it was never alive, or that it wasn't a real dinosaur, would mean that what appear to be fossil bones are in fact artificial reproductions. Yet it is unlikely that the museum piece itself was ever literally alive. Even if an animal still exists when only its dry bones remain (comprising less than a tenth of its original matter), little if any of the matter making up the dinosaur when it died is left in its mineralized skeleton. We can, of course, point to the skeleton and say truly, "That animal lived 100 million years ago." But then we can do the same with a footprint or a drawing. These statements do not imply that the thing we point to is an animal that lived in the distant past, but only that it is a sort of relic or trace or representation of such an animal. (They are cases of deferred ostension.) And the same may be true of the fishmongers' boast.

Of course, the dead fish in the market relate to the live ones in the sea in a more intimate way than the fossil skeleton does to the dinosaur, and this might be a reason to think that the dead fish were once alive even if the skeleton wasn't. That would be a reason to think that human animals become corpses when they die. But this is a different argument, based not on ordinary talk but on a metaphysical claim.

9. The Annihilationist's Dilemma

The metaphysical argument can be put in the form of a dilemma. If you watch an animal die, it looks as if the thing that starts out in a living state ends up in a nonliving state. It doesn't appear as if the dying thing ceases to exist and something else takes its place. This is presumably why we so naturally call the dead thing an animal and say that it was once alive. Think about what it would mean if the corpse were something numerically different from the live animal. Where could the corpse have come from? How does it get there? There seem to be just two possibilities.

The corpse might have existed before the animal's death, somehow composed of the same matter as the animal. This would mean that the atoms composing a living animal always compose something else as well, namely the thing that will one day be the animal's corpse. This "corpse-to-be" would be physically identical to the animal, without being an animal itself. And somehow it would be able to survive the event that annihilates the animal. This would be an odd sort of biological dualism. We might call it corpse concurrentism.

Or the animal's death might bring the corpse into being. This implies that nothing persists through an animal's peaceful death, apart from its small parts, such as individual atoms. And it implies that killing an animal is a way of bringing a new object into being. Peaceful death would be an essentially creative event, like conception. Call this view corpse creationism.

If animals don't become corpses, either corpse concurrentism or corpse creationism must be true. And both look like views best avoided. The obvious remedy is to accept that the corpse is the animal that died, just as it appears to be. For that matter, all annihilationists face this dilemma, whether they take us to be animals or not. Whether denying that we are animals makes annihilationism any easier to defend is a moot point.

Note, however, that our becoming corpses would not by itself solve the problem. At some point a corpse will itself cease to exist. If its particles then continue to compose something--a "postcorpse", we might say--this object will be something other than the corpse. We can then ask where it came from, and we shall be forced to choose between "postcorpse concurrentism" and "postcorpse creationism", which look no more comfortable than the horns of the original dilemma. The solution would seem to be that the corpse continues to exist until its particles cease to compose anything at all[3]--fairly late, presumably, in the process of decomposition. In other words, there are no postcorpses. But if we have to deny the existence of postcorpses, why not say the same about corpses, thus avoiding the original dilemma? I will return to this thought in the final section.

10. Animal Identity

The annihilationist's dilemma is the primary case for corpse survivalism. The case against is that it's hard to find an account of animal identity (or the identity of human people) that is consistent with it.

Whether animals come to be corpses turns on what it takes for an animal, or an organism generally, to persist through time. The best-known answer, and the one endorsed by most of those who have thought most deeply about these matters, is that an organism persists just as long as its biological life continues. (It was the view of Aristotle and Locke; see also van Inwagen 1990: 145, Wilson 1999: 89-99.) It is characteristic of living organisms that they take in matter and impose on it a complex and delicate form. The organism maintains this form despite wholesale material turnover. The process of imposing and maintaining this dynamic stability is the organism's life. That an organism begins to exist when its life begins is more

[3]More carefully: Consider the particles that compose a corpse at the last moment when it exists (or if there is no such moment, at a moment preceding the first moment when it no longer exists and arbitrarily close to it). Now consider the first moment when the corpse no longer exists (or if there is none, at a moment following the last moment when it does still exist and arbitrarily close to it). Those particles compose nothing at that moment.

or less uncontroversial (even if there is disagreement about when this is: whether the life of a human organism, for instance, begins at fertilization or at gastrulation some sixteen days later). The proposal is that an organism comes to an end when its life ends. More generally, an organism existing at one time is identical to something that exists at another if and only if the event that is the organism's life at the one time is the event that is the other thing's life at the other. Call this the life account of organism identity.

The life account rules out an animal's becoming a corpse: a thing has no biological life when it's dead. Survivalists need a different account of animal identity. They will presumably accept that every organism must have a life at some time--what else could make it an organism? And perhaps they can agree that while an organism is alive, it goes where its life goes. The reason why I am the animal that sat in this chair last week (if indeed I am an animal) is not that I am now composed of the same matter that composed it then, or even most of the same matter: few atoms remain parts of me for long. Nor is it that I am the result of a process of gradual material turnover starting with that animal then, or that I am spatiotemporally continuous with it. This is true of many things besides me: for instance, my left foot is the result of a process of gradual material turnover starting with the animal that sat in this chair last week, and it is spatiotemporally continuous with that animal; yet my left foot isn't me. What makes me the animal that sat here last week seems to be that that animal's biological life is my life: the activities of the atoms composing it then constituted a grand self-organizing event that continues to this day, when it is constituted by the activities of my current atoms. But perhaps this needn't rule out an organism's existing after its life has come to an end. What survivalists need is an account of what it takes for an animal to persist after it has died. What determines which future corpse is me? How does a corpse have to relate to me, as I am now, in order to be me?

A natural thought is that a certain corpse is me because of its historical links to my biological life (Ayers 1991: 216-228). While an organism is alive, it goes where its life goes; afterwards it persists, composed of matter that its life last animated, for as long as that matter retains enough of the arrangement its life imposed on it. When that is no longer the case, the organism comes to an end.

The historic-dependence account of organism identity, as we might call this, fits nicely with an attractive account of what makes something a part of an organism at a given time, or what determines it spatial boundaries (Ayers 1991: 224f.). An organism appears to extend beyond the spatial boundaries of its life. The extremities of a sheep's horns, for instance, are "dead": they are not served by its blood supply or caught up in its metabolic processes. Yet they seem to be parts of the organism. What makes them parts of it ought to be something to do with their historical connection to its life: it is the earlier activities of this life that laid them down. And if the earlier activities of an organism's life enable it to extend beyond that life's spatial boundaries, they ought to enable it to extend beyond that life's

temporal boundaries too.

11. The Historic-Dependence Account

The historic-dependence account allows that animals come to be corpses when they die; the life account implies that they don't. I am not aware of any other account of animal identity. Which is right?

Sensible though it may sound, the historic-dependence account is hard to state in any detail. The original thought was that a dead thing existing at a later time is an organism that was alive at an earlier time just in the case that the dead thing is composed, at the later time, of some of the matter that composed the organism when it was last alive, and this matter retains enough of that life-caused arrangement. But suppose our sheep dies and its remains are burnt to ashes--apart from an ear, which remains intact. Then the ear is composed of some of the matter that composed the sheep when it was last alive, and that matter continues to be arranged more or less as it was then. According to our original thought, the ear would therefore be the sheep: the sheep would have become a detached ear. In fact the formulation is compatible with the sheep's becoming an ear even if all its remains are preserved--it could become an "undetached" ear--for in that case too the ear would be composed of some of the matter that composed the sheep when it was alive, with its arrangement preserved. I take that to be absurd.

We might avoid the detached-ear problem by saying that after its death an organism must continue to be composed of enough of the matter composing it when it died. It won't be easy to say how much is enough, but I suppose an ear's worth is too little. And we might solve the undetached-ear problem by specifying that after its death an organism cannot be a part of a larger object composed of matter appropriately related to the organism's life. That would give us something like this:

> If x is an organism at t and y exists at a later time t*, x=y if and only if either
> i. y is alive at t* and y's life at t* = x's life at t, or
> ii. y is not alive at t*, y is composed at t* of a sufficient proportion of the particles that compose x when x dies, y's particles at t* are arranged at every time between x's death and t* more or less as they are when x dies, and at t* y is not a part of any other thing whose particles relate to x's in these ways.

(Devising a time-symmetric version would be a straightforward but tedious exercise.)

But we can easily see that this is inadequate. For one thing, it doesn't allow for a corpse to acquire any new particles. As the corpse absorbs moisture in damp weather, the absorbed molecules would not become parts of it; they would be foreign bodies, like pebbles embedded in a tree trunk.

Nor does the account appear to allow for a corpse to be revived. The

trajectories of the particles composing an animal when it dies could be reversed--a process that would look like a film of an animal's death and subsequent decay running backwards. The result would be a living animal. If the corpse is the animal that was once alive, the result of reviving it ought to be the original animal too: no one would suppose that an animal can live, die, and become a corpse, but would necessarily cease to exist if brought back to life. The proposed account allows this only if the revived animal would have the same biological life as the original. Because the persistence of the organism while it lives is supposed to depend on the sameness of its life, however, and not vice versa, there is no guarantee that this would be so.

12. Troubles for historic dependence

These defects could no doubt be remedied at the cost of some added complexity. To my mind, the real trouble with the historic-dependence account lies not in the fine detail, but in its broad structure. For one thing, it is irreducibly disjunctive: it says that what it takes for an organism to persist is one thing while it is alive, and something else entirely when it's dead. The sort of continuity that its identity over time consists in changes dramatically at death. That is inevitable, for a living organism and a corpse are, in a way, radically different sorts of thing: a living organism has a dynamic stability involving constant renewal of its matter, like a fountain, whereas the stability of a corpse, like that of a stone, is due entirely to the intrinsic stability of its materials (van Inwagen 1990: 83-94).

Might the account's disjunctive form be only apparent? Could its disjuncts be species of a single sort of "continuity of form"--some unified condition broad enough to cover the persistence of both living things and corpses? It seems unlikely. Suppose we neatly divide a higher animal--a sheep, say--into "upper" and "lower" sections, the lower about twice as large as the upper, and undertake all possible measures to prevent any further damage to them--providing life-support machinery and so on. What would happen to the animal? The account implies that if this occurred while the animal was alive, it would survive, at least for a while, as the upper part, as that is where its biological life would now be going on. (The lower bit would have no life at all: it would be only a mass of individual cells.) And that seems right. But what if we divide the animal when it's dead? The account doesn't say what would happen, but it suggests that the animal would be either the lower bit, or else a "scattered" object composed of both. That it would be the upper bit, in any case, is all but ruled out. Continuity of life and continuity of the arrangement brought about by a life are completely different conditions. If there is any unified condition encompassing both that is more than a vague gesture, no one has ever proposed it.

There is of course nothing wrong with irreducibly disjunctive conditions as such. Being an uncle is one: an uncle is either a brother of a parent or a husband of a parent's sibling. But such concepts, as Plato said, don't carve nature at the joints.

They are artificial, gathering up disparate phenomena to suit our interests. Organism, on the other hand, is a natural-kind concept if anything is. That there is a science devoted to the study of organisms as such is no mere reflection of contingent human interests. Organism could hardly be an irreducibly disjunctive concept. Admittedly it doesn't follow from this that the conditions under which organisms persist are not disjunctive. But it would certainly be surprising if they were.

A second problem for the historic-dependence account is that it tells us so little about what it takes for an organism to persist when it's dead. The problem is not merely that it appeals to conditions whose obtaining is a matter of degree without specifying that degree: that it doesn't say, even vaguely, what proportion of the original particles suffices, or how similar their arrangement must remain to the original one. More serious is that it gives no information about what happens to a corpse in a range of important cases. Suppose a hand falls off (or a hoof, or a paw). With a bit of good will, the account might just about imply that the corpse is not thereby reduced to a detached hand; but beyond that we're on our own. Does the corpse get smaller by a hand? Does it become scattered, composed of detached hand and "hand complement"? Or does it cease to exist? Does it matter whether the hand remains intact, or whether it remains in contact with the rest? To take another case, what happens if the corpse is cut precisely in half? Does it go with one of the halves? If so, which one? Does it matter where the cut is made? Or suppose the corpse is sliced neatly into a dozen equal sections. Does it survive? If so, in what form? Does it make a difference if the sections get put back together? Does it matter what sort of organism it is? And so it goes. The account is entirely silent on these questions.

Perhaps this is because the account as I have described it is radically incomplete. Maybe it's right as far as it goes, but tells us only a fraction of what there is to know about the conditions of organism persistence. The full version, with all the detail filled in, will enable us to answer the troublesome questions (even if in some cases the answer is that it would be indeterminate whether the resulting being was the original organism: they would not be definitely one, but not definitely two either). But I have no idea how to fill in the missing detail. I don't even know where to begin. There are many different and incompatible ways of proceeding, and I see no principled way of deciding among them. The reason is that I have no idea what happens to a corpse if a hand falls off, or it is cut in half, or the like. Nor, to my knowledge, does anyone else.

It may be that we are just irredeemably ignorant about these cases: the questions have answers, but for some reason we can't know them. (Merricks 1998 offers such a reason.) But that would not address the disjunctiveness problem. What's more, it looks doubtful whether the questions really have answers.

13. Pluralism and Corpse Eliminativism

How could these questions about organism identity, or more precisely corpse identity, fail to have answers? We have already seen two views that would account for this. One was pluralism: the view that, for any possible candidate for being the history of an organism, there is an object--a candidate for being the organism--with precisely that history. This implies that if the corpse loses a hand, there is a being that begins with the organism and coincides with it till death, then becomes a corpse, and finally gets smaller by a hand. Another being does the same, but retains the detached hand as a part and becomes a scattered object. Yet another does the same again but perishes when the hand falls off. And insofar as nothing about the way we use the term 'animal' or 'human being' (or the relevant pronouns and proper names) determines which of these the term applies to, the question of what happens to the corpse when its hand falls off has no answer, or at any rate none other than that it is indeterminate. However, pluralism makes it unlikely that the question of whether we become corpses at death has any answer either; so whatever its merits, it is no help in defending survivalism.

The other view was "corpse eliminativism", that strictly speaking there are no corpses, but only particles arranged corporeally. Talk of corpses is no more than a convenient fiction. Talk of corpses persisting through time is a fiction too. We can say that a corpse gets smaller when a hand falls off, or we can say that it becomes a scattered object; but if there are no corpses, neither statement will be strictly true. They will be merely more or less useful ways of loosely describing a situation that contains only particles. And it would be no surprise if the rules governing this loose talk gave only scant guidance on what to say in such a case (Olson 1997: 149-151).

Eliminativism implies that we don't become corpses when we die (even if it allows that we may speak loosely as if we did). It also answers the awkward question of where the corpse comes from if it's not the person or organism that died, avoiding the annihilationist's dilemma. As a way of defending annihilationism, though, it seems a rather drastic measure. Worse, it looks self-defeating. Our cluelessness about whether a corpse continues to exist through various transformations is hardly unique. We are no better off when it comes to the persistence of sticks, shoes, or any other ordinary nonliving objects: they too raise questions that seem to have no right answers. If that supports eliminativism, it's a reason to deny the existence of these things as well. Won't we then have to deny that there are any living organisms or people--that we ourselves do not exist? That would be a strange way of saying what happens to us when we die!

But the argument for corpse eliminativism is not so easily generalized to <u>living</u> organisms. The life account of organism identity (§10) avoids the objections facing the historic-dependence account. It is not disjunctive. Nor does it raise questions that seem to have no answers, even vague ones. If a live animal has a hand fall off, or is cut in half or what have you, there will be at most one resulting object that has a life, and the life account suggests that that object is the original animal. Living

organisms are metaphysically better behaved than nonliving things. That's why Aristotle and others combine something like the life account with the view that the only real composite objects are living organisms. (Van Inwagen 1990 is a detailed defense of this view.) So we might say that we cease to exist at death because the only nonliving objects are things without parts. That might be theoretically elegant, though not be very comforting.

For all its initial attraction, then, the view that we become corpses at death is hard to defend. If we ask what it would take for us to persist through time if it were true, the answer seems to be some sort of historic-dependence account. But the artificiality and radical incompleteness of such an account suggests that it could be true only given pluralism, which would make it indeterminate whether we become corpses. And the view that death is annihilation is beset with problems so severe that the best solution may be to deny the existence of corpses. It would be nice if we could avoid the extremes of pluralism and eliminativism. But an easy and satisfying metaphysics of death is elusive.[4]

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