

Games of cricket and the General Resurrection

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Abstract: It is often objected to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the dead that if we reject dualism and disembodied existence there is no way even for God to bring it about that a resurrected person is identical with his or her supposed original, rather than just a duplicate. My response is that if God *intended all along* that people should have two periods of existence, the problem vanishes. In a Test Match, there are long periods when the ground and stands are empty and no play takes place, yet no-one says that the resumed game may only be a duplicate of that of the previous day. The same holds for a resurrection intended from the beginning.

The traditional picture of the afterlife in Christian history has been in terms of two stages. The body disintegrates after death and ceases to exist, while the soul survives in disembodied form; but at the Last Day bodies and souls are reunited in the General Resurrection – what Tom Wright has called the ‘life after life after death’. Popular Christianity has perhaps tended to stress the first stage and play down, or even omit, the second. And this dualist tendency has been reinforced by elements taken, consciously or not, from dualist philosophers like Plato or Descartes. This goes back to patristic times; the Platonist Bishop Synesius rejected the general resurrection altogether.

By contrast, there has grown up in recent years a body of avowed ‘Christian materialists’, who reject altogether the notion of disembodied existence. This is not as a rule on biblical grounds (the New Testament would seem if anything to support what I have called the ‘traditional picture’) but on philosophical grounds. But if this materialism is to be Christian, it must leave some sort of hope for the future, and for those who have died; if for this life only can we have hope, we Christians are of all people most to be pitied. The Christian hope must be for an embodied existence, such as is envisaged by the doctrine of the General Resurrection.

But now a new difficulty presents itself. Can a person whom God raises up on the day of resurrection be the *same* as a person who died, it may be, many centuries before? It seems not. Consider an analogy used in the literature on the subject. The Colossus of Rhodes fell down in an earthquake in 226 BC. Its remains lay on the ground for many years, but were eventually destroyed. If they had been pieced together again, and the stature re-erected, it would undoubtedly still be known as 'The Colossus of Rhodes', and rightly. But if after its final disintegration someone had come across the designs of its artist, and built a statue exactly like the original, we should certainly think of it as a new statue and have given it a different name, 'The New Colossus' perhaps. Not even God, surely, could bring the original statue into being again; though no doubt any duplicate He created would be absolutely accurate, if He so chose, yet a duplicate it would remain.

In the same way, if God wishes to 'raise up' somebody who has previously died, and thereby ceased to exist, He can doubtless duplicate that person's body with absolute accuracy (though there are problems even here: the body will have changed a great deal during its life on earth, and which stage is to be raised up?). He can ensure that it has the memories and the mindset of the deceased (with the same reservation). But it will be a duplicate, for the original is dead and gone. And could such a duplicate be justly judged and rewarded or punished?

Worse than that, He might create more than one duplicate. This would not matter with a new Colossus of Rhodes; it would matter very much with a human being. Which of the two is the real whoever-it-is? Science fiction writers have played with this idea in their own terms (Simak (1984)), but that is for the entertainment of their readers, and the General Resurrection is more than that.

There is no great problem where cases like that of Lazarus or the widow's son at Nain are concerned. There the body of the deceased still existed and was reanimated; no question of duplication arises. It would be like the reassembling of the Colossus from its broken parts. Nor is there a problem for anyone holding the 'traditional' dualist view. The soul survives into an 'intermediate state', and though at the Last Day it is united to a new body, the person whose soul it is has never wholly ceased to exist. And it can hardly be united to *two* new bodies. But for Christian materialists there is a real problem.

Some have resorted to weird and wonderful scenarios to resolve the difficulty. Thus Peter van Inwagen (1978) has suggested that at the moment of death God creates a corpse *ex nihilo* and simultaneously snatches the real body into the new life; and that He gives the body the power to 'bud off' a new body, again at the moment of death (see also Zimmerman (2010)). I think that these scenarios (which plainly bear little resemblance to the biblical picture of resurrection) were intended chiefly to show that the idea of a general resurrection is not actually *impossible*; they are probably not thought of as accounts of what really happens.

However, I believe that a much simpler solution, and perhaps a more biblical one, can be found without recourse to anything weird or wonderful (except in so far as all God's works are wonderful). I begin with the game of cricket.

(For those readers unfamiliar with it, the details of the game do not matter here: suffice it that major international games, known as ‘Test Matches’, are normally played over a period of five days, and in groups or ‘series’ of three or more matches.)

At the end of the first day’s play (and of the next three, if no result has yet been achieved), play ceases altogether. The players, umpires, scorers, and so on go off to a well-earned rest. The other staff and the spectators also leave. The ground and its stands are silent and deserted. A visitor ignorant of the game or of what has been happening would not realize that a match was in progress. But it is; on the next morning play will be resumed from the point at which it stood the previous evening. And nobody would suggest that this was a different game, or a mere duplicate of the one begun the day before; it is unquestionably the *same* game. Similarly, an interval will take place between matches in a series, but it is still the *same* series.

The reason is, of course, that the match was planned all along to have intervals at the end of each day in which actual play would not be taking place. Test Matches are by their very nature ‘gappy’, composed of *episodes*. It is interesting that on one famous occasion both gappiness and ungappiness were involved. In 1883 the English team visiting Australia was scheduled to play a series of three Test Matches; Australia won one, but England two. England thereby won the series. Later, however, an additional, unscheduled, game was played, which Australia won. But the English team had still won the series, not drawn it, because the fourth game was never planned as part of the series.

And it seems fully consonant with Christian teaching that the same applies, or may apply, where human lives are concerned. If dualism is incorrect (I should in honesty say that I do not myself think it is), and some form of Christian materialism is true, then it seems highly probable that when God created human beings He did so with the intention that they should have an episodic or ‘gappy’ existence. Each one should die and be no longer seen (like the Test Match), but should also in due course, like the Test Match, have another period of existence – should, in fact, rise again. And therefore he or she is indeed the same person as the one who died: whereas if there had been no such intention the situation would be like the extra game in 1883, not part of the same human life any more than the fourth game then was part of the planned series.¹

It has been suggested to me that cricket matches are ‘continuous events admitting of no breaks’, but containing various episodes not all of which are play. The laws of the game, however, speak of ‘the cessation of play before any interval or interruption’, and an interval or interruption seems to me to be a break. As I said, there are no visible signs of a game after the ‘cessation of play’; ‘continuous’ seems a very odd word to use. Granted, the match has not gone out of existence overnight. Anyone acquainted with the game and knowing that more play was intended could await its resumption without worry; similarly, we are not, even if we are ‘Christian materialists’, to be sorry for those who have fallen asleep, like

others who have no hope.² Contrast a game of football, where during the half-time break the stands are as full as before, the players and officials are on the ground, though not the field, and our visitor ignorant of the game would be aware that *something* was going on, even if he or she came to the ground during the break.

I can see one difficulty with my proposal. When the Test Match resumes on the second day of play, the teams are identical with those who left the field the previous evening. But the resurrection body is clearly to be very different from that which we have now (see 1 Cor. 15:33–44). This has in fact always been an awkward matter for believers in the general resurrection, especially if it is insisted that the bodies with which we rise again are in some sense the *same* as those with which we died. I do not think it is insuperable. The appearances of the cricketers resuming their game need not be absolutely indistinguishable from their appearances earlier. They might be wearing different clothes; they might have shaved off beards; there might even be a ‘twelfth man’ or substitute among them, replacing a member who was unwell. It is enough that they be recognizably the same team. Similarly, it is enough that the person who rises again be recognizably the same – especially to him- or her-self (here the resurrection of the *mind* – memories, beliefs, habits of thought, and so on – might be important). This may need a bit more work: Professor Oppy tells me that the rules of American football allow the entire team to be replaced in the course of a game. Could God follow their example and plan in advance to resurrect someone in a form totally different from that which they had previously? Well, even if He could we have, I think, no reason to suppose that He has in fact done so.

It has also been suggested to me that God’s intention might not be necessary for identity over time. If the bits of a dead person’s body were reassembled in the same way as they were when he or she died, we should have the same body in existence as at the time of death, and if the body then came to life we should have the same person too. I can see various difficulties with this; but in any case it was not vital to my argument to say that God’s intention was necessary for the resurrected person’s identity, only that it was *sufficient*.

In point of fact, of course, there are many other things in the world besides cricket matches which are or can be episodic. Literary careers, for example, may be interrupted by illness or distraction, but (if resumed later on) will clearly be the same literary career as before the interruption. Performances of *Othello* are divided into acts, but the intention of the players is to produce a single play. I cited cricket because it was the example that first occurred to me (and because the 1883 events nicely illustrated both the original difficulty and its resolution). But whatever parallel we prefer, the point is that if God meant us all along to take up our lives after death, then even the Christian materialist may after all have hope.

References

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Notes

1. Some might want to say that this only held good after the Fall, without which people would have lived forever without gaps. Obviously this, even if true, would not affect my argument; the intention for human existence to be 'gappy' would simply have taken shape later.
2. 1 Thessalonians 4:13. It is perhaps worth noting that St Paul, though of course he did not have our present discussion in mind, refers to 'those who sleep in Jesus', not to 'those who have gone out of existence'.