God, the Soul, and Coherence: A Response to Davis and Hick

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I

I argue that belief in bodily resurrection is groundless and belief in disembodied existence is probably incoherent.[1] If we can come to believe in God, as 'God' is construed in orthodox Christianity, we can hope for bodily resurrection as a straightforward matter of faith, but viewed as an empirical hypothesis about how things are likely to be, such an eventuality is thoroughly unlikely. Disembodied existence, by contrast, is so problematic as to make it beyond reasonable belief given our resources for understanding. By contrast, the reasonableness of belief in bodily resurrection depends entirely on the reasonableness of belief in the God of Christian orthodoxy. Without that belief as a reasonable human option such a belief is irrational.

Against the analytical current, Stephen Davis has powerfully, and in an incisively analytical manner, argued that the very idea of disembodied existence is not incoherent.[2] There are, he claims, logically possible circumstances where the memory criterion by itself will suffice for establishing personal identity. We must, of course, be able to distinguish between apparent memories and genuine memories for the memory criterion actually to be a criterion. But it is Davis's belief that this can be done with disembodied agents.

Suppose Hans dies and suppose we say that Hans in a disembodied form goes to heaven. Hans, Davis argues, can be identified just in case the purported Hans can remember correctly the details of his former earthly life. If there is a coherent pattern of memories here, to which, in an ordinary way, only Hans would have had ready access, then it is reasonable to say, Davis would have it, that the purported Hans, bodiless though he is, is indeed the real Hans. We have genuine memories as distinct from only apparent memories, if we have such patterns of coherence in memories. In heaven the various people could be identified just in case we have, for each of the

purported disembodied persons, such patterns of coherence. Suppose this came to pass, and it could, it is claimed, for it is, or so the story goes, consistently thinkable. We have described, that is, what would have to obtain for it to obtain, and then these purported disembodied persons are identifiable. The purported Hans does not just *seem* to remember, he *really* does remember if such a coherent pattern of memories obtain. The same holds for any other putative disembodied compatriots in heaven. If the purported disembodied Hans remembers such things happening to him, then, if these memories really fit in a pattern, it is reasonable to believe there really is such a Hans – a disembodied Hans.

The soul, what either temporarily or permanently is said to exist in a disembodied way, gives Hans, in those circumstances, his personal identity. But with such a conception we have nothing which is *testable*, for neither here nor in heaven do we have a way of observing such souls, and thus we have no way of knowing who Hans or anyone else is in such an alleged state and thus we cannot identify him. Since no thesis having to do with souls can be tested, the purported Hans cannot know whether he has a soul and nor can we.

Davis believes that to talk in this verificationist way confuses talk about *criteria* for personal identity with talk about *evidence* for personal identity. He argues 'that the presence or absence of a soul or of a certain soul is not something for which we can successfully test'.[3] Neither my Sarah example in 'The Faces of Immortality', nor the Hans example here, could count, if such things were to obtain, as evidence for disembodied existence. Such claims for disembodied existence, Davis avers, are not testable.[4] But while soul-claims could not count as evidence for personal identity, such things with the memory-claims they involve could reveal, Davis claims, a criterion for personal identity. However, having a criterion that we could never use because we would not know how to use it to make testable claims for the possible application of a concept (for example, disembodied existence), *particularly where the concept in question is already problematic*, is like having a fifth wheel. It is at best a decorative appendage doing no work. If this is verificationism and anti-realism make the most of it for, whatever we say in general about such doctrines, it is plain they have a point in certain contexts, for example, anti-realism about modalities or values. If no one can know whether there are disembodied beings, or what it would be like to identify them, then it is pointless to try to use such a concept to establish personal identity claims. Pointless, someone might say, but

not incoherent. Well, to return to my wooden jetliner example in 'The Faces of Immortality', while not being a self-contradictory conception, still, when we think of what it would be like for such a thing to be, it is plain that it is an incoherent conception. Similar things obtain for the purported disembodied Hans, Sarah, Sven and Alice, somehow supposedly comparing their patterned memories in heaven. We have no idea of how we could go about establishing their identities. This being so we cannot sort out which memory patterns belong to which of these putative persons.

II

John Hick has no more room in his belief-system for bodily resurrection than I do. He remarks that 'from the standpoint of a modern biblically and theologically critical Christian faith the raising of physical bodies is one of the elements of the tradition that has been filtered out in the evolution of Christian thought'.[5] He is also not a defender of the soul as a disembodied reality but understands resurrection in terms of a replica theory. There are, however, at least two decisive objections to that:

1. Persons are such that they are unique. There can be only *one* instance of each person. A *replica* of Hans could not be Hans. (If this is a conventionalist's sulk so be it.)
2. If the replica was not a complete replica, but had a substance in common with what it was a replica of, namely a disembodied existent which, even in a second or two passed from the original to the replica, this still would not be a coherent conception unless disembodied existence makes sense.

Being temporary, even momentary, makes no difference at all. It is the very idea of disembodied existence that causes the trouble. Moreover, if in turn it is said, and said correctly, that a conception of the afterlife is entirely beyond our understanding, then it is beyond our understanding, and we cannot think it, or form beliefs about it, or take it as an article of faith. We can only have faith in what we in some sense understand; we cannot take Irglig on faith for we do not understand what it is to take it on faith.[6]

Hick thinks that between us there is essentially a clash of fundamental worldviews. From my atheistic worldview or standpoint,

belief in God and the afterlife is implausible; for him, by contrast, from his theistic worldview or standpoint it is highly plausible. Hick rightly sees that I am not content just to accept a perspectival-relativism where we all just have our respective clashing viewpoints and there is nothing more to be said. It is just, given such an acceptance, a matter of which faith-perspective you take up or which grips you.

While not at all wanting to say we can leap over history and just come to know what is the case ahistorically, I am claiming that for someone living in our time in the west, and with a good scientific and philosophical training, it is not reasonable for such persons to believe in God or the afterlife. This is not to say that there are no good philosophers or good scientists who are Christians. There plainly are and it is not to claim atheists are generally more reasonable than theists. That is absurdly false. There are plenty of reasonable people on either side here as well as unreasonable people. But reasonable people can have, and frequently do have, some beliefs which are not reasonable. My claim is that for scientifically well-educated and philosophically sophisticated believers belief in God and in the afterlife is unreasonable. My basis for that claim is (1) my arguments for either the incoherence or falsity of these beliefs, their being one or the other depending on how they are construed, and (2) my claim that my arguments are not so arcane or so different from other arguments with widespread currency in our intellectual life that they are not widely available in intellectual circles. My claim is the hypothetical one that *if* my arguments are sound and non-arcane, then, for anyone who is in a position to be aware of them and with the capacity critically to appraise them, then, for that person, belief in God is irrational.[7] (He may be a generally reasonable person with an irrational belief here. That is common enough among both believers and non-believers.) I am further, and not unsurprisingly, claiming my arguments are sound and non-arcane. But I am not just trading faith-perspectives with John Hick, for I am fully *cognisant* that I may be mistaken. But I am also cognisant of the fact that whether I am mistaken or not is something that is in the public sphere for us – that is, we contemporaries – to reason out whether we are Christians, Jews, atheists or what not. It is not a matter of 'Here I stand, I can believe no other'. There are facts of the matter about what arguments are sound and what are not, and what is arcane and what is not, that are just there to be established.

Notes

1. Kai Nielsen, 'The Faces of Immortality', in this volume.
2. Stephen Davis, 'The Resurrection of the Dead', in this volume.
3. Ibid., p. 136.
4. Here his account makes a sharp contrast with that of Paul Badham's. See Paul Badham's 'God, the Soul, and the Future Life', pp. 36–52, in this volume.
5. John Hick, 'Response to Nielsen', p. 32, in this volume.
6. Kai Nielsen, 'Can Faith Validate God-talk?' in my *God, Skepticism and Modernity* (Ottawa, Ont.: University of Ottawa Press, 1988).
7. See the last chapter of *God, Skepticism and Modernity*.