



## Outside the Church There Is No Death

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### Abstract

According to classical Christian doctrine, the human body is not a container for the soul but its “form”. In defending a form of this view, I suggest that the resurrected body of Christ represents the truth of human flesh. In the light of the resurrected and glorified body of Christ, who still bears his wounds, death can be understood as the loss of something irreplaceable and therefore mourned as a horrific deprivation of life; that is, because eternal life consists in the vision of God by our whole selves, and not just a separated soul, a proper Christian anthropology that began in some sense with the glorified body of Christ as the “truth of the physical” might suggest a very different biomedical practice than that with which we are familiar, which often proceeds from a methodological materialism underwritten by a dualistic metaphysics.

### Keywords

Death, bioethics, substantial form, soul, resurrection, theological anthropology.

“The human body is the best picture of the human soul.”<sup>1</sup>

“I changed the subject by jerking my head once more toward the research building before we turned out of its sight. ‘We’ve got that to be grateful for, maybe even pious about. Then years ago our children wouldn’t have stood a chance.’

‘So death by leukemia is now a local instead of an express. Same run, only a few more stops. But that’s medicine, the art of prolonging disease.’”<sup>2</sup>

I am sure I am not the first person to have noted the irony (if not the political cynicism) of the timing of the passage of *The Patient*

<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1963), p. 178.

<sup>2</sup> Peter DeVries, *The Blood of the Lamb* (New York: Penguin, 1982), pp. 182–3.

Protection and Affordable Care Act in the United States Senate on Christmas Eve, 2009. Doubtless this was an occasion for much unwarranted hysteria on the part of some reactionaries, which are in no short supply these days. But there is also just enough Machiavellian shrewdness in the act to make one wonder at the naked opportunism of a political machine deciding on such a monumental and controversial health care plan (notwithstanding the repeated and insistent opposition to portions of the plan by the nation's Catholic bishops) on one of the holiest nights of the Christian year. One suspects that the Senate counted on the fact that most people would be occupied by a different kind of wonder, over this night visitor or that. Maybe they banked on the possibility that many people would, on Christmas Eve, be in their cups or in their stocking caps, settling down for a long winter's nap. It was probably a safe bet. But I mention the timing of Christmas intentionally, since this is precisely where John Paul II's encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* begins, inasmuch as the Nativity of Christ "reveals the full meaning of every human birth, and the joy which accompanies the Birth of the Messiah is thus seen to be the foundation and fulfillment of joy at every child born into the world. . . It is precisely in this 'life'"—in risen, eternal communion with the Father—"that all the aspects and stages of human life achieve their full significance."<sup>3</sup> I shall return to this in due course.

But I must confess at the outset a congenital inability to make sense of or speak intelligently about the documents of officialdom, or to shed any kind of insightful light upon the gastrointestinal taxonomy of the Leviathan whose head makes its home inside the Beltway. I can speak no more authoritatively about the present constitution of modern medicine or the actuality of the experience of the physician or patient or about the science of modern biology—not, however, that this is enough to stop me from trying to do so anyway, but such is life in Yeswecanistan.<sup>4</sup>

My interest here, though, is rather broader and more basic, that is: the latent and often (perhaps deliberately) occluded philosophical and theological assumptions about the status of the human person insofar as the latter constitutes the presumptive object of contemporary health care law. I want to suggest here that the understanding of human life and what constitutes it *per se* is altogether conceptually unavailable to the science of biology itself, and that biotechnological practices in particular presume an account of human nature which it cannot avoid articulating, even if at several degrees of remotion, by its very

<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 25 March 1995, §1

<sup>4</sup> I owe this expression to Eugene McCarragher, who apparently borrows it from William Blum.

practice.<sup>5</sup> Finally, we cannot have an adequate account of human being—if at all—without theology.

As Michel Henry writes, “In the field opened by modern science, there is no person. It is not that the upheaval of knowledge that resulted from the emergence of the entirely new scholarship of modern science has similarly upset (or at least modified) our idea of a person, what makes his essential Being; rather, science quite simply suppresses it.” Thus François Jacob said that “Biologists today no longer study life”.<sup>6</sup> Commenting on this, Henry says, “To know that biology is no longer concerned with life, you have at least to know what life is, which is precisely what biology does not know.”<sup>7</sup> This is because biology adopts a kind of “methodological materialism” as its default position as well as its founding disposition towards the

<sup>5</sup> “Criticisms...regarding the ordering principles and methods of modern science/technology are typically set aside today as at best arcane, in light of modernity’s evident successes in enhancing human health and comfort and in reducing suffering—through medicine and medical technology, for example. Modern science, in other words, has “worked,” and this “practical” criterion is taken to suffice, a priori, to render moot any critical scrutiny of science and its method(s) in their constitutive order as such. Moral questions as a matter of principle are deflected away from the question of the cosmological/cognitive order embodied in scientific technology, toward the question of how this technology is used or applied.

What it is crucial to see, however, ... is that such a deflection changes the nature of the moral question. It reduces morality as it bears on science and technology to a form of positivism. Insofar as moralists grant the order of nature and of knowledge as assumed in modern science and technology, they—*eo ipso*—lose the non-arbitrary “foundation” in nature and knowledge necessary for raising the moral question in its proper sense at all, that is, as a reasonable matter integral to the truth of things. The modern order of intelligence as sketched above implies denial of the givenness of nature as (“transcendentally”) true and good (and beautiful!), and its replacement by the idea of *verum! bonum! pulchrum quia factum*. Indeed, this order implies loss finally of the very notion of nature itself, the ratio of which includes both nature’s givenness and its immediate-intrinsic demand on us (that is, both its being-given and also, by virtue of being-given, its being-good). We have, in other words, the replacement of premodernity’s being/nature and the good with modernity’s “fact” and “value”: “fact” is now an (empirically-accessed) mechanism whose intelligibility is elicited through human control, while “value” is the human will’s imposition on “fact” of what is now only nonnaturally “good”—i.e., “good,” not as given first-intrinsically by nature, but only as posited, instrumentally-arbitrarily, by man.” David L. Schindler, “Biotechnology and the Givenness of the Good: Posing Properly the Moral Question Regarding Human Dignity”, *Communio* 31 (Winter 2004), pp. 612–45, at 617. Further, “Biotechnological practices...involving as they do knowledge, control, and manufacturing, just so far involve—are mediated by and indeed themselves instantiate—a definite mix of philosophical (ontological) cosmology, anthropology, and theology.” Moreover, “A putatively purely technical or empirical biotechnological practice, in short, is, precisely as a practice, (also) a distinct (albeit often unwitting) theory of nature and knowledge (mechanism), which in its turn implies a distinct theory of the universe in its entirety: of (human) life and its goodness (nonnaturalism), and of God (a-theism). Acceptance of a practice so conceived, therefore, logically requires, and in the end can only permit, an ethics consistent with such a theory” (pp. 625–6).

<sup>6</sup> François Jacob, *The Logic of Life: A History of Heredity*, trans. Betty Spillman (New York: Pantheon, 1973), p. 299.

<sup>7</sup> Henry, p. 263.

body.<sup>8</sup> So while biology, paradoxically, can disclose to us neither the nature of life nor the full meaning of the body, on the contrary, “the obsolete knowledge of Christianity, a knowledge that is two millennia old, furnishes us not with entirely limited and useless data about humans: today it alone can tell us, in the midst of the general mental confusion, what man is.”<sup>9</sup>

*What, then, is man?*

Beginning in the 1970s, in the wake of the *Roe v. Wade* decision, the notion of “personhood” became a contested locus in theology and philosophy. Stanley Hauerwas registered the limits of this approach in a famous essay in 1975 entitled, “Must a Patient Be a Person to Be a Patient? Or, My Uncle Charlie Is Not Much of a Person, But He Is Still My Uncle Charlie.”<sup>10</sup> Implied in Hauerwas’ classic title is the suggestion that in some way the relations of natural—and especially ecclesial—kinship are ontologically prior to the philosophical concept of “person”. Notwithstanding Hauerwas’ criticism of the language of personhood the topic has been vigorously renewed in the direction of relation and reception in recent years among Catholic philosophers and theologians, conducted largely in the pages of the journal *Communio* by the likes of then-Cardinal Josef Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, David L. Schindler, Steven A. Long, Kenneth L. Schmitz, W. Norris Clarke, and others. In brief, these figures have proffered an enriched conception of the person on much more explicitly theological grounds in the spirit of a *nouvelle théologie*-inflected Thomism. One of the contributors to this discussion, the German philosopher Robert Spaemann, has suggested, in his important book, *Persons*, that:

“Talk about ‘persons’ is common enough; talk about ‘souls’ has come to be discreditable. Materialism, in reductionist and non-reductionist versions, attempts to eliminate the soul without remainder and to account for its states and activities physiologically. Christian theology has more or less declined to put up a defence. Unwilling, for one thing, to accept ontological commitments at variance with those of its contemporaries—for theology more than ever today leans towards pastoral opportunism at the cost of intellectual and religious substance—neither does it want to obscure the biblical message of bodily resurrection with a philosophical doctrine of the soul’s immortality. Yet how are we to think of our earthly and risen bodies as identical

<sup>8</sup> Adrian J. Walker, “‘Sown Psychic, Raised Spiritual’: The Lived Body as the Organ of Theology”, *Communio* 33 (Summer 2006), p. 26

<sup>9</sup> Michel Henry, *I am the Truth*, p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> In *The Hauerwas Reader*, ed. John Berkman and Michael G. Cartwright (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 596–602.

without a soul to provide for their continuity, is a question rather seldom asked.”<sup>11</sup>

While theology, especially where the practice of medicine is concerned, may indeed privilege “pastoral opportunism” over “intellectual substance,” there are some theologians who have been willing to put up a defense against the methodological materialism, if not nihilism, at the basis of modern science. For example, as Sergei Bulgakov showed, every positivistic account of human life and death succumbs to “the ultimate ontological absurdity of a double annihilation: an appearance out of nothing and a return to nothing, a soap bubble that has burst, whose real content is emptiness. In order to avoid accepting the problematic of death, unbelieving thought takes refuge in this ontology of nihilism, in the ‘outer darkness’ of a double nonbeing: *before* death and *after* death.”<sup>12</sup> Death, then, is an “act of life”,<sup>13</sup> and can only be understood within the context of life, and not *vice versa*. Death then is intelligible only in virtue of that of which it is a privation: “God made not death, for he created all things that they might have their being.” (Wisdom of Solomon 1.13,14).<sup>14</sup>

The classical language for this, which the Church has never really done without, is that of the soul as the “form of the body”. This indivisible unity of body and soul is what constitutes human being, not a composite of “rational” bits and “material” bits. As Aquinas puts it, the rational soul is “the substantial form of the body”. He even claimed that “The soul is more like God when united to the body than when separated from it, because its nature is then more perfect.”<sup>15</sup> “Although after death (in which the soul is separated from

<sup>11</sup> Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference Between “Someone” and “Something”*, tr. Oliver O’Donovan (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p. 148.

<sup>12</sup> Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, p. 350. “Like all creation, man is an alloy of being and nonbeing; and the latter raises its head and is actualized whenever his ontological equilibrium is shaken. This equilibrium can be definitively established only by the universal absoluteness and fullness of the life revealed in the God-Man, who even in His human nature overcame the weakness of creatureliness. Original sin is an actual and universal violation of ontological equilibrium in all of humankind and in each human individual. This equilibrium is restored only in Christ. Therefore, God’s judgment upon every individual is not an externally imposed punishment, but expresses the ontological consequence of the violated equilibrium and the bared creatureliness: ‘dust thou art.’” (Sergei Nikolaevich Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, tr. Boris Jakim ((Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2002)), p. 352.)

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> Aquinas explains this passage at *ST I-II.85.6*, resp.: “But God, to Whom every nature is subject, in forming man supplied the defect of nature, and by the gift of original justice, gave the body a certain incorruptibility, as was stated in the I, 97, 1. It is in this sense that it is said that ‘God made not death,’ and that death is the punishment of sin.”

<sup>15</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *On the Power of God*, 5.10, ad 5., p. 149. See Rémi Brague, “The Soul of Salvation”, *Communio* 14 (Fall 1987), pp. 215–22, at 228: “the idea of soul as the form of the body allows for a philosophical expression of an intuition which we have seen was consubstantial with Christianity. Salvation is not the renunciation of an ‘inferior’

the body) not only does the animal not remain but no part of the animal remains, except equivocally, as is said in *On the Soul II*; yet flesh and bone would seem to remain more after death than hand or arm, in which the operations of the soul are more evident.”<sup>16</sup> In 1312 the Council of Vienne solemnly enjoined all Christians to uphold and defend the doctrine of the rational soul as the essential form of the human body, and anathematized the contrary position as heresy.<sup>17</sup> The Church has maintained this position pretty consistently, despite centuries of nuance and refinement. This is reflected in John Paul II’s thought, when he speaks of

...the *Church’s teachings on the unity of the human person*, whose rational soul is *per se et essentialiter* the form of his body. The spiritual and immortal soul is the principle of unity of the human being, whereby it exists as a whole — *corpore et anima unus* — as a person. These definitions not only point out that the body, which has been promised the resurrection, will also share in glory. They also remind us that reason and free will are linked with all the bodily and sense faculties. *The person, including the body, is completely entrusted to himself, and it is in the unity of body and soul that the person is the subject of his own moral acts.* The person, by the light of reason and the support of virtue, discovers in the body the anticipatory signs, the expression and the promise of the gift of self, in conformity with the wise plan of the Creator.<sup>18</sup>

“Life” then is characterized above all by receptivity—not only biologically but conceptually. Life eludes conceptual formulation; in this sense it is a transcendental—“Our life is hid with Christ in God.” In contrast to the late modern Baconian-Cartesian mastery of nature, nature is precisely not that which possess as an inalienable property but as a gratuitous gift. “Human beings ‘have’ their life, but they have it as recipients who were not asked whether they wanted it. They only

stratum of reality, but its recapitulation. The soul, in parallel fashion, is the recapitulation of the body: it gives to the body a unity which puts it on a level superior to the sum of its parts. The idea of the soul is thus the very negation of salvation as escape. Affirmation of the soul is what allows us to take seriously the ‘faithfulness to the earth’ which the dogma of the Resurrection expresses.”

<sup>16</sup> *In De generatione et corruptione*, 1.15,108, in Pierre Conway, and R.F. Larcher, tr., *Exposition of Aristotle’s Treatise on Generation and Corruption, Book I, cc. 1–5.* (Columbus OH: College of St. Mary of the Springs, 1964).

<sup>17</sup> Council of Vienne, 1311–12: “Moreover, with the approval of the said council, we reject as erroneous and contrary to the truth of the catholic faith every doctrine or proposition rashly asserting that the substance of the rational or intellectual soul is not of itself and essentially the form of the human body, or casting doubt on this matter. In order that all may know the truth of the faith in its purity and all error may be excluded, we define that anyone who presumes henceforth to assert defend or hold stubbornly that the rational or intellectual soul is not the form of the human body of itself and essentially, is to be considered a heretic.”

<sup>18</sup> John Paul II, *Veritatis splendor* § 48.

exist as those who have received life.”<sup>19</sup> Hence St. Bonaventure says that “This is the death of men: they desire to possess and maintain.”<sup>20</sup>

Bodies, after all, do not suffer pain and die; human beings do. Whatever is meant by the language of “the separation of the body and the soul” at death has—irrespective for the moment of whatever unsavory philosophical connotations it may possess—at least this to commend it: the human being is a substantial unity. Death, therefore, is a genuine loss, an indication of a disruption in the ontological order of reality itself, and never simply an exchange of one type of clothing for another. Man, Thomas Aquinas says, “is not soul alone”. He adds that this is in contradistinction to the view that the soul “makes use of the body” as an instrument, an idea which he attributes to Plato.<sup>21</sup> It belongs, he says, to human nature to have a real body.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the “separated soul” is an intermediate state for Thomas, whose destiny is to rejoin the body, though in a mysterious new mode, since “it is contrary to the nature of the soul to be without the body.”<sup>23</sup> Thus he writes that “the soul united with the body is more like God than the soul separated from the body, because it possesses its nature more perfectly.” Again, bodies do not die; as Spaemann says, “Only persons die.”<sup>24</sup>

### *Oblivio mortis*

One reason why modern Christian funerals can be such garishly sentimental affairs is surely because of the shroud of Cartesianism that envelops our understanding of “the resurrection of the dead”. We cannot think of it in anything other than post-Cartesian (or worse, Gnostic) terms, that is to say: the body is the chamber of the soul, and at death we are burying or cremating something merely material, but, oddly enough, that which is entirely ‘immaterial’ to our true selves. The latter we sometimes identify with ‘soul’: that region of true human selfhood which is inscrutable to the human gaze, utterly inaccessible to human communication. Most of us, I think, tend to be more Cartesian or even Manichean than Christian when it comes to thinking death and resurrection. Many of us believe that, as Herbert McCabe once put it, “We consist of two bits: a body and a soul. The body has to do with the public world, with science and the realm of Ceasar which passes away; the soul has to do with privacy, with

<sup>19</sup> Spaemann, *Persons*, p. 123.

<sup>20</sup> Bonaventure, *Collations on the Six Days of Creation*, V. 3, p. 75.

<sup>21</sup> *Summa Theologiae*, Ia.75.4, *resp.*

<sup>22</sup> *Summa Theologiae* IIIa.5.1, *resp.*

<sup>23</sup> *Summa contra gentiles*, IV.79, 10.

<sup>24</sup> Spaemann, *Persons*, p. 114.

values and with the realm of God, which does not pass away.”<sup>25</sup> At a recent funeral I attended, the preacher said something along the lines of this, namely that here we were committing to the ground the “physical” part, but the “spiritual” part lives on.<sup>26</sup> This may all be a part of a very laudable and natural human desire for consolation in the face of the evidently absurd, but more often than not the notion of the resurrection remains, even in the face of death, little more than a pious fiction for most Christians insofar as it might offer us some consolation in a time of grief but we don’t really imagine resurrection as the truth of our bodily existence. Rather we seem often to regard death as the reality and resurrection as—at best—an escape from the order of death. Resurrection, that is, is the exception and death is the norm. But this, it seems to me, has it rather backwards.

Take, for example, the recent novel by the Portuguese Nobel laureate José Saramago, *Death with Interruptions*.<sup>27</sup> In it, a small nation wakes up on New Year’s Day to find that, in the previous twenty-four hours, not a single person has died. No death notices to report, no corpses to transfer to the morgue, no tears to be shed over the dead. In Saramago’s variation on an old theme, Death has taken a holiday. But what would seem initially to be a source of great joy and celebration quickly descends into chaos: whole industries whose subsistence is premised on the reliable and faithful operations of death are now scrambling to find new rationales for their existence. The life insurance industry begins recalculating “death” so that their clients’ policies automatically expire at age eighty; funeral homes are likely to be run out of business; and a grisly cadre of border bandits emerges whose trade consists (with the secret collusion of the government) in transporting the dying over the frontier of a neighboring country that has not suffered the unfortunate violability of death. (There is a subtle analogy here with the medical industry, who are not unlike the band of mobsters who transport the dying across the mystical frontier separating life and death.) Most vocal in opposition to the State’s handling of the crisis is the Catholic Church. Early

<sup>25</sup> Herbert McCabe, *Faith within Reason*, ed. Brian Davies OP (London: Continuum, 2007), p. 124.

<sup>26</sup> A friend with whom I attended the funeral remarked on the peculiarity of the fact that the ceremony was held in the funeral home, conducted by the pastor of the Methodist church to which the deceased belonged, and which was directly adjacent to the funeral home. The oddity of the fact that the ceremony was held in the funeral home, under the auspices of the managerial bureaucracy of death, as opposed to the church next door, was not lost. This episode is, I think, indicative of the extent to which the Church has evacuated death and left its carcass for the funeral industry—an act of convenience, to be sure, but one which betrays a loss of faith in the older Christian liturgies of death and a resignation to newer, more superficially consoling ones.

<sup>27</sup> José Saramago, *Death with Interruptions*, tr. Margaret Jull Costa (New York: Mariner, 2009).



in the novel, the anonymous Cardinal phones the prime minister in panic:

It is utterly deplorable that when you wrote the statement I have just listened to, you failed to remember what constitutes the foundation, the main beam, the cornerstone, the keystone of our holy religion, Forgive me, your eminence, but I can't quite see what you're driving at, Without death, Prime minister, without death there is no resurrection, and without resurrection there is no church...<sup>28</sup>

Now Saramago is no big fan of the Catholic Church—and I suspect that in some quarters of the latter the feeling is mutual—but he expresses here what is I think the unstated, maybe even intuitive assumption of most Christians and indeed atheists like Saramago. But it seems to me that another novelist is closer to the truth (or at least my thesis, which I grant may not be the same thing). In a letter to a friend, Flannery O'Connor once wrote that “it is the virgin birth, the Incarnation, the resurrection which are the true laws of the flesh and the physical. Death, decay, destruction are the suspension of these laws. I am always astonished at the emphasis the Church puts on the body. It is not the soul she says that will rise but the body, glorified.”<sup>29</sup>

The distinction between the “earthly” and the “glorified” body might be understood in some way to convey the irremediable sense of loss involved in any human death. Yes, we will be raised incorruptible, but there is something of this life, this body, that will not be restored, whatever that is. Because our resurrection is not simply the re-assembly of this mortal flesh and bones, our death is not identical with their dissolution, either. The body which is promised in resurrection maintains a kind of paradoxical relation to the “earthly”, one neither of strict identity nor sheer equivocal difference. Without resurrection we are, as Shakespeare says, “Creature[s] unprepared, unmeet for death”.<sup>30</sup> The extent of our unpreparedness, it seems, reaches down to the very level of ordinary language: a culture which, out of some deep insecurity about its own mortality, would rather call chicken battered and cooked in hot fat “crispy” as opposed to “fried” cannot realistically be expected to distinguish truthfully between “death” and “passing away”.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>29</sup> Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1979), p. 100.

<sup>30</sup> William Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure* (New York: Penguin, 2000), IV.3, p. 80.

<sup>31</sup> Curiously, the term “casket”, originally “a small box or chest for jewels, letters, or other things of value, itself often of valuable material and richly ornamented” (OED), only began to replace the older term “coffin” in the middle of the nineteenth century. The origins of the term are poetic, having been employed by Shakespeare in *King John* V.i.40:

Therefore, “Christianity”, as Alexander Schmemmann writes, “is not reconciliation with death. It is the revelation of death, and it reveals death because it is the revelation of Life. And only if Christ is Life is death what Christianity proclaims it to be, namely the enemy to be destroyed, and not a ‘mystery’ to be explained.”<sup>32</sup> As Pascal says, “Not only is it through Jesus Christ alone that we know God but it is only through Jesus Christ that we know ourselves. We know life and death only through Jesus Christ. Without Jesus Christ, we do not know what our life, nor our death, nor God, nor ourselves, really are.”<sup>33</sup> As Conor Cunningham suggests, “without this perspective, we can never speak of the horror of death, for it would be only a natural event, a moment in a process, and any resistance to it would be the result of an illusory sense of worth. Moreover, in being part of a natural process, the problem of actually picking it out, that is, noticing it when employing only natural terms, would be intractable. In short, death is horrific and abnormal, and such imitations of its unnaturalness point to it being overcome—not by positing some heaven in the sky, or through talk of a soul slipping away to some ephemeral realm, but by speaking of the hope of bodily resurrection, hope already present, however implicitly, in our noticing death and our sense of repulsion from it.”<sup>34</sup> Resurrection, then, grounds the possibility for naming death truthfully; otherwise “men will seek death, but will not find it; they will long to die, but death will elude them.”<sup>35</sup> We don’t know what we’re looking for.

The point of the foregoing is that a Christian anthropology must, it seems to me, begin with the resurrected body as in some sense the paradigmatic form of the human person. Death, therefore, does not ‘release’ the human soul; talk of the resurrection of the flesh would make little sense in such a context. But neither does resurrection entail a sentimentalization of death or a kind of stay against death’s universal dominion. It does not imply that we can treat death without horror, or not regard it as a real loss. A proper Christological account of the person might prevent us from a kind of anthropological docetism: the body is not really “me”; moreover, my body is not really anything at all. The irony of this species of materialism causes the body itself to vanish. For as Josef Pieper points out, referring to Thomas Aquinas’ commentary on Aristotle’s *De generatione*

“They found him dead. . . . An empty Casket, where the Jewell of life. . . . was rob’d and tane away.”

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s, 2004), pp. 99–100.

<sup>33</sup> Pascal, *Pensées* I.36, in *Pensées and Other Writings*, tr. Honor Levi (Oxford: OUP, 1995), p. 10.

<sup>34</sup> Conor Cunningham, *Darwin’s Pious Idea* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010), p. 417–8.

<sup>35</sup> Revelation 9:6

*et corruptione*, “it is not enough to say that [at death] the physical organism itself no longer remains. Even the limbs of the body must be spoken of in an entirely different sense of the words. To say ‘flesh and bones’ may still be meaningful; but in the strict sense it is no longer possible to speak of a ‘hand’. Only a living, animated hand is really a hand at all.”<sup>36</sup> But only if Christ’s death is real, if it is the death of his truly human being, can our deaths be thought of as horrific and worth grieving.

Hannah Arendt once wrote that “The miracle that saves the world, the realm of human affairs, from its normal, “natural” ruin is ultimately the fact of natality, in which the faculty of action is ontologically rooted.”<sup>37</sup> To rephrase Arendt slightly, we might say that the miracle that saves the world—even death—is resurrection. She wrote that ‘this faith in and hope for the world...found perhaps its most glorious and most succinct expression in the few words with which the Gospels announced their “glad tidings”: ‘A child has been born to us.’<sup>38</sup> The nativity of Christ is already an anticipation of resurrection insofar as it instantiates or consummates an order of gratuity grounded in the act of creation itself. To Arendt’s insight we might add that of von Balthasar, for whom it is first the mother’s smile over her child that marks the nature of existence as such as both “miracle and play”, an experience of the sheer glory and gratuity of created existence, which is nothing other than that of love, of the “reality of being admitted” into a world of existence which you did not choose for yourself. This irreducibly generous act of generation is the first in the drama of divine glory as experienced by human beings and the ground for a properly Christian metaphysics of the body.<sup>39</sup>

Outside the Church there is no Death: what I mean by this should now be somewhat clear: the human body is not a container for the soul but its form. In the light of the resurrected and glorified body of Christ, who still bears the wounds of the thorn and the lash, the cross and spear, we can genuinely mourn one’s death as the loss of something irreplaceable; that is, because eternal life consists in the vision of God by our whole selves, and not just a separated soul, a proper Christian anthropology that began in some sense with the glorified body of Christ as the truth of the physical might suggest a very different biomedical practice than that with which we are familiar. The latter might presume the body as a given datum of medical experience, whose death it is the object of medicine to prevent

<sup>36</sup> Josef Pieper, *Death and Immortality*, p. 36.

<sup>37</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: The University of Chicago, 1998), p. 247.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord, Volume V: The Realm of Metaphysics in the Modern Age*, tr. Oliver Davies, et al. (San Francisco: Ignatius, 1991), pp. 615ff.

or postpone. But the doctrine of resurrection does not permit us to treat the body as inert, premoral matter; rather it already bears the anticipatory signs of its eternal future. Thus we can say that the body was not made for death, but for resurrection.

As David Hart writes, “Only in the light of this impossible desire for the one who is lost, this insane expectation of a restoration of the gift, and this faith in what is revealed at Easter is it *morally* possible for Christian thought to regard the interval between oneself and the lost beloved as potentially an inflection of divine rejoicing, a distance of peace: not by way of some sublation of the beloved, nor according to the serene proportions of tragic wisdom, but by way of the Holy Spirit’s ingenuity in resurrection, his ability to sustain the theme of God’s love (the gift given) over the most dissonant passages, now under the form of hope.”<sup>40</sup> Contra the tragic pathos of modern dying, death is not ennobling but destructive: “For there is hope for a tree, if it be cut down, that it will sprout again. . . . But man dies, and is laid low; man breathes his last, and where is he?”<sup>41</sup>

Our life, as St. Paul says, “is hid with Christ in God”.<sup>42</sup> Neither biology nor physics can ask “Does God exist?” But importantly, neither does theology have much interest in this question; the latter doesn’t begin by trying to prove an answer to it. But in light of the foregoing, the question at the intersection of theology, philosophy and medicine is not, “Does God exist”, but “Do human beings?”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> David Bentley Hart, *The Beauty of the Infinite: The Aesthetics of Christian Truth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2003), p. 394.

<sup>41</sup> Job 14.7,10.

<sup>42</sup> Col. 3.3.

<sup>43</sup> “If we are to grasp the concept of creation, we must expose the limitations of the subject/object schema, the limitations of ‘exact’ thought, and we must show that only when the *humanum* has been freed of these limitations will the truth about humankind and the real world come into view. And yet we must not try to overstep the limitations by denying God, because that would also be the denial of humankind—with all its grave consequences. In fact, the question at stake here is: “Do human beings really exist?” The fact of human beings is an obstacle and irritation for ‘science’, because they are not something science can exactly ‘objectify’. Pope Benedict XVI, *In the Beginning. . . . A Catholic Understanding of the Story of Creation and the Fall*, tr. Boniface Ramsey, OP (San Francisco: Ignatius 1995), p. 86.