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David Paulsen

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Natural theologians have argued that God (logically) must be incorporeal, without body or parts. This conclusion apparently contradicts the common Christian beliefs that God (the Son) was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, and now exists everlastingly with a resurrected body. In this paper, I examine the most common rational arguments for divine incorporeality and show that none of them is sufficient to prove it, and that, therefore, none need be a stumbling block to rational acceptance of the resurrected Christ as God.

Thinkers within the western theistic tradition have for centuries reasoned that God (logically) must be incorporeal, without body or parts. Yet Christian theists commonly affirm that God (the Son) was incarnate in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, was crucified and raised from the dead, and now exists everlastingly with a resurrected (though gloriously transformed) body. These views apparently conflict. For if God *must* be incorporeal, then the resurrected Christ cannot be God.

The problem can be expressed in terms of an inconsistent triad:

(i) Jesus of Nazareth exists everlastingly with a resurrected body.
(ii) Jesus of Nazareth is God.
(iii) N (if x is God, then x is incorporeal).

The conjunction of any two propositions of the triad entails the negation of the third.

In this paper, I examine the most common rational arguments for proposition (iii); I conclude that none of them is sufficient to prove it, and, hence, that none ought be a stumbling block to rational acceptance of the resurrected Christ as God.

The pattern of reasoning that these arguments typically follow, as well as two particular arguments, were set out by St. Anselm in the 11th century.[1] St. Anselm defines *God* as "that than which none greater can be conceived." From this general definition, he deduces not only *that* God exists (by means of the famous ontological argument), but *what* God is like. In particular, he argues that 'x is the greatest conceivable being' logically entails 'x is incorporeal.' It will be helpful to outline his position in some detail.

In defining the formula 'greatest conceivable being,' Anselm makes it clear that by 'conceivable' he does *not* mean *psychologically* imaginable—otherwise, God's greatness would not exceed the limits of human thought. Thus, by 'greatest *conceivable* being' he apparently means that than which no greater is *logically* possible.

As to what he means by 'greatest,' Anselm explains that the greatest conceivable being would lack nothing that is 'good' and would be 'whatever it is better to be than not to be.' Contemporary commentators have plausibly suggested that in this context the value-terms ('greatest,' 'good,' 'better') are best understood as signifying *religious* values. On this view, when Anselm refers to 'the greatest conceivable being,' he means 'that than which a no more worthy of worship is logically possible.' The formula is often shortened to '*the most* worthy object of religious worship' or '*the most* adequate object of religious attitudes.' I will take these shortened formulae to be equivalent to that stated by Anselm.[2]

This bit of analysis provides the backdrop for six separate arguments for divine incorporeality, which I now examine.

A. *The Argument From Divine Infinity*

From the formula 'x is the greatest conceivable being,' Anselm first derives 'x cannot be limited in any way.' J. N. Findlay suggests the following rationale:

> It is wholly anomalous to worship anything limited in any thinkable manner. For all limited superiorities are tainted with an obvious relativity, and can be dwarfed in thought by still mightier superiorities, in which process of being dwarfed they lose their claim upon our worshipful attitudes. And hence we are led on irresistibly to demand that our religious object . . . should tower infinitely above all other objects.[3]

Then from the inference that God cannot be limited in any way, Anselm concludes that God cannot be or have a body. He argues:

> But everything that is in any way bounded by place . . . is less than that which no law of place . . . limits. Since then, nothing is greater than thou, no place . . . contains thee; but thou are everywhere . . . .[4]
>
> For altogether circumscribed is that which, when it is wholly in one place, cannot at the same time be in another. And this is seen to be true of corporeal things alone. But uncircumscribed is that which is, as whole, at the same time everywhere. And this is understood to be true of thee alone.[5]

Anselm's argument can be summarized as follows:

A

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
2. The most worthy object of religious worship cannot be limited in any way.

3. If God were corporeal, then he would be limited in that he could not be, as a whole, at the same time everywhere.
4. Hence, God cannot be corporeal. (1) (2) (3)

As a first, admittedly *ad hominem*, objection to premise 2, it is instructive to note that if it is understood literally, St. Anselm himself cannot consistently affirm it. For if God were absolutely unlimited, he would have to be the whole of reality, and thereby not the Creator-God of theistic theology who is ontologically distinct from his creations and who gives his creatures some measure of independence over against himself. It is the existence of the latter, I take it, that Anselm is attempting to prove. Similarly, if God were not limited in any way, God could not possess any determinate attributes, either positive or negative. For example, if God were immutable he would be limited in that he could not be mutable or if he were atemporal he would be limited in that he could not be temporal. Indeed, Findlay suggests that absolutely unlimited being may well entail "a deific absence of anything definite." But Anselm employs his deity-formula to generate some eighteen divine attributes.

Ad hominem objections aside, Findlay's assertion that it is absolutely anomalous to worship a being limited in any thinkable manner seems to mistakenly imply that a limitation, *qua* limitation, is thereby a defect. But surely this depends, rather, on the nature of the limitation. Obviously, a limitation in something that is not admirable—ignorance, selfishness, cruelty, etc., would be a good thing. Anselm makes it clear that the greatest possible being would be absolutely unlimited only in every admirable or great-making attribute. But even here we have long recognized that it is possible to "have too much of a good thing." A virtue taken to excess may become a tragic flaw. One may be too trusting, too generous, too helpful. Limitations, *qua* limitations, are value-neutral. Moreover, as Charles Hartshorne has taught us, not all values—especially in their superlative form—are logically compossible; for example, unlimited compassion and unlimited bliss.[6] Nor do all great-making properties or perfections admit of completion. Thus, divine perfection cannot coherently be understood as being complete in all respects.

No doubt what Anselm meant, or should have meant, then, is 2′: the most worthy object of religious worship must be unlimited in every respect in which to be so is (i) possible, (ii) admirable, and (iii) when conjoined with other excellences worship-worthy maximizing. [Hereafter, I shall let "wwm" denote conditions (ii) and (iii).] But if we replace premise 2 in St. Anselm's argument with 2′, the argument is no longer valid.

B. *The Argument from Divine Power*

In order to make St. Anselm's argument work now, we shall have to supply some additional premise(s). More specifically, we will need to show that there is some particular respect in which God must be absolutely unlimited that is both possible and wwm and, at the same time, incompatible with his being corporeal. Perhaps we may think that unlimited power would satisfy these conditions; that is, perhaps we may think that the following proposition is true:

5. It is both possible and wwm to be absolutely unlimited in power.

Using 5 we can construct the following argument for divine incorporeality:

B

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
2′. The most worthy object of religious worship must be absolutely unlimited in every respect in which it is both possible and wwm to be so.
5. It is both possible and wwm to be absolutely unlimited in power.
6. N (if x is corporeal, then x is not absolutely unlimited in power.)
7. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

We must now consider whether premise 5 is true. And the first question we must ask is, Is it possible for God to have absolutely unlimited power? Here the answer is clearly negative. Indeed, the logical paradoxes generated by the notion of absolutely unlimited power are too well-known to merit rehearsal. To salvage a coherent view of God, thinkers have been compelled to opt for definitions of *omnipotence* considerably more restricted than its etymology would suggest. Recently, for example, Kenny has proposed that *omnipotence* be understood as "the possession of all logically possible powers which is logically possible for a being with the attributes of God to possess," where "attributes" refers to properties of God that are not themselves powers.[7]

Given Kenny's proposal, how do we determine which attributes God possesses? If this is to be determined by revelation and if revelation confirms that God (the Son) is embodied, then omnipotence must be understood in terms of the logically possible powers which is logically possible for, *inter alia*, an embodied God to have. So understood, there would be no conflict between divine power and divine embodiment.

If on the other hand, we must ascertain all of the divine attributes by reasoning from St. Anselm's formula, we must ask: (i) how much power must the most worthy object of religious worship possess? and (ii) could an embodied being coherently possess that much power?

In considering the first question, it seems evident that from a religious point

of view, the matter of God's power relates to our practical needs for individual help, protection, and preservation. We look to God for forgiveness of our sins and for power to repent, for strength to cope with and be refined by our adversities, for comfort in our trials, and above all, for salvation and eternal life. We trust that God's power is sufficient to satisfy these needs and expectations, and to fulfill all his purposes and promises. For this to be assured, it seems as if God must be supreme and have power over all things so that no one or no thing can thwart the fulfillment of his will. Let us use the term *almighty* to refer to the power described.

If we grant—and it seems we must, at least from the perspective of the ordinary believer—that in order to be the most worthy object of religious worship *it is necessary* that God be almighty, must we also grant that such power is *sufficient*? It seems so. God's worship-worthiness connects most essentially with his personal and moral attributes—his holiness, his loving kindness, compassion, longsuffering, justice, equity, veracity—as they are faithfully and steadfastly expressed in his personal dealings and relations with us—as father, creator, savior, exemplar, and friend. His power too is relevant, but only to the extent that it is needful to accomplish those ends which he, as a perfectly loving and righteous father, freely chooses. To suppose otherwise is to affirm that there is something worship-worthy about power *per se* quite apart from the good ends it makes possible. That some may, *in fact*, value or even worship power *for its own sake*, I don't doubt. But this is neither religiously nor morally required.

If my reasoning is correct, then it is neither possible nor wwm for God to be absolutely unlimited in power; and, thus, proposition 5 is false. But our analysis also supplies the following more satisfactory alternative to 5:

5′. The most worthy object of religious worship must be almighty.

To make St. Anselm's argument work, we must also show:

8. N (If x is corporeal, then x is not almighty.)

But is 8 true? If it is, it is by no means self-evident. Some further premise(s) must be supplied to show why a corporeal being cannot be almighty. St. Anselm's argument suggests a possible connecting link—that is, his argument suggests that if God is almighty, he must be omnipresent; and that if he were omnipresent, he could not be corporeal. With these claims, we can again reconstruct Anselm's argument:

C. *The Argument From Divine Omnipresence*

The argument can be stated as follows:

C

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
5′. The most worthy object of religious worship must be almighty.
9. N (If x is almighty, then x is omnipresent).
10. N (If x is omnipresent, then x is not corporeal).
11. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

To properly evaluate this argument, we must understand more clearly what is meant by the claim that God must be omnipresent. Anselm suggests that if God is omnipresent, then he is present, as a whole, at the same time everywhere. This notion is less puzzling when we consider it in its religious setting. Perhaps the idea is nowhere better captured than in the hymn of the Psalmist:

> Lord, thou hast examined me and knowest me.
> Thou knowest all, whether I sit down or rise up . . .
> Where can I escape from thy spirit? Where can I flee from thy Presence?
> If I climb up to heaven, thou art there;
> If I make my bed in Sheol, again I find thee.
> If I take my flight to the frontiers of the morning or dwell at the limit of the western sea,
> Even there thy hand will meet me and thy right hand will hold me fast.[8]

Religiously, the affirmation of God's omnipresence is the assurance of God's loving awareness of all that is transpiring, his constant watchful care,[9] and his ability to intervene (in human history and in our individual lives) to fulfill his purposes and promises. Thus, it seems that divine omnipresence is crucially related to his power and knowledge; and that if he is almighty, then he must be omnipresent.

This brings us to a consideration of premise 10. Is it true that an embodied being could not be omnipresent? The question has recently been carefully examined by Grace Dyck (now Jantzen).[10] She correctly points out that the claim that an embodied being cannot be omnipresent is ambiguous between 'His body cannot be everywhere,' which, she says, is true but harmless, and 'He cannot be everywhere,' which, she argues, is not necessarily true. The harmless truth follows analytically from the meaning of the word *body*. By definition, a *body* is spatially locatable and can only be in one place at one time. But if a being is omnipresent, then there is *no* place where it is not. Thus, is appears that the notions of omnipresence and corporeality are logically exclusive.[11] Dyck rebuts this conclusion by means of a careful analysis of the meaning of the relevant sense of 'presence' and, then, derivatively, of 'omnipresence.' Most critical to her analysis, she shows that (i) *It is not the case that I am present only in the*

volume of space occupied by my body; and (ii) *To be present at x means, most essentially, to be aware of what is going on at x and, perhaps, to be able to some extent to influence it*. In support of (i), we would surely say of a speaker addressing the Senate that he is present in the Senate Chambers even though it is not the case that the spatial coordinates of his body are co-extensive with those of the Chambers. And as to (ii), how would a Senator who slowly falls asleep as a bill is read and remains so throughout the ensuing debate, correctly answer the question, "Were you present when the measure was considered?" Or suppose a hearing on a bill to eliminate veteran's benefits is held in a hospital ward of comatose veterans. Could they correctly be said to be present for the hearing?[12]

On her analysis, Dyck concludes that if God has a body which is spatially locatable somewhere in the universe and if, from that position, he knows and is able to influence *everything* that is going on, then he could properly be said to be omnipresent. If this is correct, then premise 10 is false, and the argument from omnipresence fails.

But one may still feel constrained to ask, How would it be *causally* possible for God to be spatially located in the universe and yet be aware of and able to influence all that is going on? I don't know. This, I take it, is a question for the theologian. But, perhaps, two brief suggestions would not be out of order. First, Dyck points out that modern mathematicians have shown that three-dimensional geometry is not the only possible geometry, indicating that it is merely a limitation of our conceptual structure that we perceive only three spatial dimensions. Dyck thus conjectures that God may occupy or be localized in dimensions outside our ordinary experience from which he may express his 'thereness' in every part of the universe.[13] Second, a glorified body may be the source and locus from which emanates the divine spiritual influence everywhere immanent in the world.

D. *The Argument From Divine Indestructibility*

Anselm suggested a further argument for incorporeality when he wrote:

> For, whatever is composed of parts is not altogether one, but is in some part plural, and diverse from itself; and either in fact or in concept is capable of dissolution. But these things are alien to thee, thou than whom nothing better can be conceived of.[14]

The following seems to capture his reasoning:

D

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.

12. The most worthy object of religious worship cannot be destructible in fact or in concept.
13. N (If x is corporeal, then x is composite).
14. N (If x is composite, then x is destructible, in fact or in concept).
15. Hence, God cannot be corporeal.

Considering premise 12, it seems evident that the most worthy object of religious worship cannot be destructible *in fact*. And let us grant, *arguendo*, that a corporeal being would, of necessity, in some sense be composite. What about premise 14? Is it true that whatever is composite is thereby destructible in fact? In Plato's *Phaedo*, it is noted that natural or physical bodies are composite and are often observed to be destroyed through a process of decomposition. From this it is concluded that *all* bodies, being composite, are likewise destructible. This, of course, does not *deductively* follow. And even if we grant that all natural bodies are liable to decomposition, it doesn't follow that a *pneumikos* body is. Finally, even if a *pneumikos* body were not inherently indestructible, it would not follow that God could not everlastingly sustain it in being. In sum, I find no conceptual incoherency in the notion of Christ's body being raised incorruptible or in the notion of an incorruptible body, *per se*.

But what about St. Anselm's worry that a body, even if not destructible in fact, would nonetheless be destructible in concept? Are all bodies destructible in concept? I suppose this depends on our concept. If we think of a body as merely a composition of little bits of matter, then it seems as if we can imagine its being decomposed. On the other hand, if we think of a body (especially a *pneumikos* body) in terms of a field of force, the idea of its being decomposed is not so readily grasped. But even if we granted that the destruction of any body is consistently thinkable, what difference would it make? Our faith in God and his promises is ultimately personally grounded in the integrity of the divine character and will, and not in the mesh of conceptual necessity. Thus, it seems that divine indestructibility does not require incorporeality.

E. *The Argument From Divine Self-existence*

H. P. Owen in his recent book *Concepts of Deity*[15] provides two more arguments for divine incorporeality, in addition to the argument from divine infinity that we have already considered. He claims that corporeality is logically incompatible with both self-existence and moral perfection. His argument from divine self-existence is very tersely stated:

> God's incorporeality can also be proved from his self-existence . . . . No material entity can be self-existent; for each is a determination, or mode, of being. Consequently we can always ask of any such entity:

"What are its causes and conditions?"[16]

The following seems to capture his reasoning:

E

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
16. The most worthy object of religious worship must be self-existent.
17. N (If x is self-existent, then x is not a determination or mode of being).
18. If God were or had a material body, he would be a determination or mode of being.
19. Hence, God cannot have or be a material body.

Premises 17 and 18 seem open to doubt or, at least, in need of clarification. Concerning 17, Owen has not explained what he means by a 'determination or mode of being,' but apparently he means something like a species or category of being, as contrasted with what? Totally undifferentiated being? If so, it seems that 17 proves too much. For personality, as well as corporeality, appears to be a mode or determination of being. By parity of reasoning, then, it would follow that a personal being could not be self-existent. But I see no basis for such a claim. Owen apparently provides the following argument for premise (17):

(i) Of any determination or mode of being, one can always intelligibly ask, What are its causes and conditions?
(ii) Of a self-existent being, one can never intelligibly ask, What are its causes and conditions?
(iii) Hence, a self-existent being cannot be a mode or determination of being.

Premise (ii) appears to be analytically true and (iii) apparently follows from (i) and (ii). Premise (i) seems questionable. What can be intelligibly asked (i.e., without self-contradiction) is a function of the syntax and semantics of our language. For example, the reason why we cannot intelligibly ask about the causes and conditions of a self-existent being is that *self-existent* simply means "without cause or condition." Premise (i) does not appear to be analytically true. If I understand 'determination or mode of being' correctly, it does not *grammatically* imply 'must or could have a cause.' Whether some particular mode or determination of being is caused or uncaused is dependent on the nature of reality, not on the meaning or structure of our language. Thus, it seems, this support for premise 17 fails; and so the premise remains inconclusive. The argument from self-existence thus fails to prove that God must be incorporeal.[17]

F. *The Argument From Moral Perfection*

Owen's final argument for divine incorporeality is based on the claim that pure spirit is the most perfect form of being. He says:

> Moreover, if a dualistic view of mind and matter is correct we can see, not only that God's pure spirituality is possible, but also that it is the most perfect form of being. All human behavior approaches perfection to the extent that it expresses wisdom, goodness and love. Yet although the body aids these spiritual properties in so far as it offers a medium for their expression, it also inhibits them in many—and some tragically frustrating—ways. Hence only pure Spirit can constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.[18]

His argument can be summarized as follows:

F

1. God = the most worthy object of religious worship.
20. The most worthy object of religious worship must constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.
21. Only pure Spirit can constitute an absolutely perfect form of personal existence.
22. N (If x is pure Spirit, then x is incorporeal).
23. Thus, God cannot be corporeal.

Owen acknowledges that the cogency of this argument depends on the Cartesian view that mind and matter are ontologically distinct, a view he does not attempt to justify. But Owen admits that unless it can be validated, we have no basis for affirming pure spirituality in God, since we could not give the concept any reference-range. It is significant to note that most contemporary defenses of the doctrine of divine incorporeality do not consist of positive arguments for it, but rather of attempts to salvage the notion of a totally unembodied person from charges that it is either cognitively meaningless or logically incoherent or contra-indicated by the weight of psychological, physiological, and other evidence. I will not rehearse the arguments and evidence here. Suffice it so say that the Cartesian anthropology on which this argument rests does not appear to be rationally coercive.

Assuming *arguendo* that there could be a totally unembodied mind, why should we consider this to be the most perfect form of personal existence? Owen suggests that human behavior approaches perfection to the extent that it expresses wisdom,

goodness, and love, and that the body inhibits these spiritual properties in "many—and some tragically frustrating—ways." Unfortunately, Owen does not explain just how the body acts as or constitutes such an inhibiting agency. Personally, I find the idea hard to grasp. Certainly, the body is not an independent agency that might override decisions or choices made by the mind. Might it then somehow be the source of all those desires or wants that may incline or tempt one to choose contrary to that which is wise, good, or loving? But to assign all these to the body and nothing but honorific attributes to the mind seems entirely gratuitous and without ground in reason or experience. (Ironically, in orthodox Christian theology, the most maliciously evil person—Satan—is also supposedly an unembodied mind or pure spirit.) It seems much more reasonable to predicate all attributes (praiseworthy and blameworthy) to the *person*, not to disparate parts of the same.

But suppose we grant that a body is a causally necessary condition of our feeling certain desires or inclinations such as the desire for food or sexual gratification. Assuming that such desires and inclinations are not intrinsically evil, would they nonetheless necessarily inhibit a person from always choosing rightly? I don't see why. The New Testament describes the mortal Jesus as one who was tempted in all points such as we, but without sin. It might well be wondered whether one who has fully confronted temptation in all its guises and conquered it is not *more* worthy of admiration and worship than one who has never experienced a conflict. It seems then that premise 21 is false; and for all the reasons given, this argument too fails to demonstrate that God must be incorporeal.

In sum, it appears that none of the common arguments for divine incorporeality considered herein is sufficient to prove it; and thus none ought be a stumbling block to rational acceptance of the resurrected Christ as God.

Brigham Young University

NOTES

1. S. N. Deane, trans., *Saint Anselm, Basic Writings, Proslogium* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court Publishing Company, 1966), ch. 2.

2. Whether this is a correct interpretation of St. Anselm's premise is irrelevant for present purposes; while highly plausible, the interpretation is also interesting and important in its own right, providing the fundamental premise for much contemporary rational theologizing.

3. J. N. Findlay, "Can God's Existence Be Disproved?" *The Ontological Argument From St. Anselm to Contemporary Philosophers*, ed. Alvin Plantinga (Garden City, New York: Doubleday

& Company, Inc., year), 111-112.

4. Deane 19.

5. Deane 20.

6. Charles Hartshorne, *Man's Vision of God* (Hamsen, Connecticut: Archon Books, 1964), ch. 1.

7. Anthony Kenny, *The God of the Philosophers* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979), ch. 7.

8. Psalms 139:7-10 (NEB).

9. "The guardian of Israel never slumbers, never sleeps" (Psalms 121:4-7).

10. Grace M. Dyck (now Jantzen), "Omnipresence and Incorporeality," *Religious Studies*, 13 (1977) 85-91; my thinking on the issues discussed in this paper has been significantly aided by Dyck's article and her later book, Grace M. Jantzen, *God's World, God's Body* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984).

11. Dyck 85-86.

12. My illustrations are similar to and suggested by those of Dyck.

13. Dyck 90.

14. Deane 24.

15. H. P. Owen, *Concepts of Deity* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971).

16. Owen 18.

17. Certainly, the ordinary believer whose faith is centered in Christ does not believe Christ's resurrected body to be self-existent. Its history began on the first Easter morning. He rather affirms that the divine person who rose from the dead on that Easter morning is self-existent and antedated both his resurrected and mortal bodies. Again barring the acceptance of a Neo-Platonic ontology, wherein one equates highest reality with absolute immutability or *purus actus*, it is perfectly consistent to think of God as a self-existent person with some *non*-self-existent, or acquired, properties.

18. Owen 18.