

Personal identity across temporal gaps: an Islamic view of the problem

The topic I will be discussing in this paper concerns the efforts of medieval Muslim theologians to establish claims of identity for human beings resurrected after a period of non-existence. Medieval Islam had room for a fairly diverse range of views about the nature of human beings, of resurrection and the afterlife in general, but what sets the stage for a problem familiar both in medieval Christianity and in contemporary philosophy is a particular combination of views found among some, though by no means all, medieval Muslim theologians. One was the view of human beings as basically physical entities for whom death meant the cessation of existence with no part of them to survive, and the other the belief that resurrection was preceded by a temporal gap – a yawning temporal gap indeed, in which created being was annihilated by God in order to be created anew afterwards.

Not everyone took the latter line, and in fact later Muslims tended to consider the question an unsettled one. Nor did all Muslims take such an uncompromisingly physical view of human beings, though the belief in a bodily resurrection was considered a central article of faith by most. The ideas I will be talking about though are those of a school of theologians - called the Mu'tazila, and flourishing between the 9th and 11th centuries AD - who put their names to both views, and who were faced with the problem of explaining how a person who passed out of existence when his body was destroyed first by death (understood as the *scattering* of his atomic constituents) and then by the great Annihilation (understood as the complete *destruction* of the atomic constituents) could be the same as the one recreated by God on the Day of Judgment.

A note is here in order about what exactly I shall be doing with these ideas – merely describing, creatively appropriating, or something different. Perhaps this is not a judgment that would apply to medieval philosophical views to an equal extent, but I think that the angles of interest one brings to bear on these texts are rarely those which one finds in the texts themselves. Questions which to us seem compelling often seem to have no such hold on medieval sensibilities and their treatments of questions can often seem to us downright *naïve*. Naïve, not in the sense that the solutions are technologically primitive but in what that partly reveals – that the problem was not felt to be of such urgency that heavier technology had to be developed. So I should say from the outset that issues about personal identity are not problematised for our medieval Muslims as highly as they are for us today (perhaps this is not the case in medieval Christianity – maybe you can tell me more about that.) But what - you may ask - is the value of making these views known if they can offer us little that would help us meet our own needs? My sense is that the value lies in juxtaposing different concepts of need and using this as part of an appraisal of our own intellectual ends, which is as important as our appraisal of the means to best meet them. Of course the juxtaposition can only work if one can fit the shape of one concern into the shape of the other to a certain extent, and this I'll try to do. But the Mu'tazilite worldview is vastly distant from our own – not only in terms of the different intellectual aims which motivated them, but also in terms of their metaphysics and in their view of empirical facts. To think of *appropriating* such views would be asking too much perhaps; but it is their very distance that makes them so interesting to understand.

First, a general word about Mu'tazilite metaphysics and the conception of human beings into which it translated. Mu'tazilite ontology was atomistic, and the

most important ontological division it drew was between two categories – atoms, and accidents. Bodies formed when atoms aggregated together, and accidents were thought to inhere in atoms and were responsible for conferring on them the attributes which they possessed. The fact that a person wills or believes, speaks or moves – all these facts are to be explained by reference to the accidents of willing or believing and so on that inhere in relevant parts of the body (in the heart for willing, in the relevant part of the throat for speaking). Following this model, human beings were conceived as aggregates of atoms into which accidents could come to inhere. The most important accidents were those of life, which were thought to inhere in every part of the body in which we have sensations, and it was important because it was held to unify the ‘locus’ in which they inhered so that it became a single subject and not just ‘so many atoms’.

The Mu’tazilite notion of death followed closely from this picture. Their idea was that a given number of atoms had to have a particular structure in order for life to be able to inhere in this locus, and though changes of structure could be accommodated within life (one can lose various parts of the body without dying), death occurred when this structure fell apart beyond a certain vague degree and the locus could no longer sustain the accidents of life. This picture made absolutely no room for any notion of soul or spirit whose ontological status would be different from that of atoms, which were understood in physical terms. When death occurred, the person ceased to exist, and he would only exist again when resurrected. Not much is said about the fate of the atomic parts that had composed him after his death. But what is clear is their fate when the end of time arrives: these parts are annihilated all at once along with all other atoms existing in the world. Next thing we know, the Day of Judgment has dawned, the trumpet has sounded, and these atoms are retrieved from nothingness and human beings are created from them anew.

The scene of annihilation is a sensationally dramatic one, as far as metaphysical descriptions go, and one has to capture its feel in order to set the stage for looking at the Mu’tazilite treatment of the problem it poses for identity. We are to imagine a world containing trees and horses and human beings and stars – at the macroscopic level – while at the microscopic level it is a teeming universe of atoms. Despite the atomistic metaphysics in which this universe is described, it is a fairly stable one: atoms are believed to continue in existence spontaneously unless something intervenes to put an end to it, and so do large categories of accidents, such as colour, shape, life, the capacity to act. Atomic existence flows until suddenly time zero arrives: at that moment God releases a single quantum or token of an ontological class which the Mu’tazila call ‘annihilation’, and whose principal property is its opposition to atoms. What is remarkable about this elusive object is that, because it doesn’t bear any exclusive relation to any particular atom, it bears a relation to *all*, and one token suffices to oust every single atom out of existence. One almost hears the ‘zap!’ as everything is extinguished out of existence. As for the ontological unit which annihilation consists in, it only endures for a single moment and then immediately passes away.

This is the gap then – a fairly steep one – which Mu’tazilite theologians had to ensure they could cross. That they felt obliged to cross the gap at all was a result of the moral views they professed. For them, the moral value of the divine act of recreation (or resurrection) is instrumental, and its value depends on that of the act which it enables, namely to render to human beings their deserts. In the Mu’tazilite scheme, God is obligated to reward, though not obligated to punish. The corollary of this valuation is that God is obliged to call out of existence those persons whose acts

have made them deserve to enjoy the pleasures of an eternal life, though not as strongly constrained in the case of those deserving punishment. And it is this same concern with the ethical which guides their interest in personal identity: one must be sure that the person punished was the one who did evil, that the person rewarded is the same person who had done good. For it would not matter quite as much how one answered the question about identity if no such weighty consequences attached to the judgment, as weighty as eternal reward or punishment. Questions about identity are as important as the purposes for which we want them settled.

More than that - the criteria one sets for identity would seem to vary in stringency depending on the purposes which guide one's interest. We care to establish a thicker view of identity when the concern is with desert and moral accountability - or rather, with deserts *of this magnitude*: we would be less stringent if the desert claim was over a mere expression of gratitude or a bar of chocolate. But with this order of desert - consisting of fire and brimstone for some and of paradisiac gardens for others - it is not enough to judge that person₁ at t₁ is identical to person₂ at t₁₀₀, where the two instants are separated by a few thousand years, and that this person had committed an evil act at t₁ in order to justify punishing him. There has to be a continuity of a thicker sort which permits us to hold the person responsible for the bygone act *now*. Since the Mu'tazilite angle of questioning was a distinctively moral one, a purely physical criterion for personal identity would have seemed inadequate unless it correlated with psychological attributes that might enter into the thicker notion of identity required by moral desert.

Nevertheless, these are my thoughts on the subject. The Mu'tazilites thought differently, and for a variety of reasons which can't be explained in a hurry - partly to do with the pluralism of their atomistic ontology, and partly with a central epistemological tenet which I'll explain - they did not develop a theory of identity that made psychological continuity paramount. Instead, they conceived persons chiefly in terms of their material locus as against their psychological features, and as a result they also made personal identity a matter of the identity of the material parts that constituted a being. And these material parts in no way correlated with interesting mental or psychological features.

The argument for this was transcendental in kind, and it came to support the epistemological theory which the Mu'tazilites had developed. Central to their epistemology was the view that in knowing that a certain entity is qualified by an attribute, the object of my knowledge is strictly speaking the *entity*, not the attribute. In Mu'tazilite epistemology, knowledge is conceived neither on a Platonic model which would involve a knowledge of universal forms nor on a propositional model such as that 'x is F'. What I know is *x-as-F*, or *x-being-F* (*x* in the state of *F*), and it is *x* that is the object of my knowledge strictly speaking. The subject of predications is epistemologically prior to predicates. The Mu'tazilites had used this epistemology on a different occasion to argue against the claim that human beings were characterised by a spirit or soul which was the real subject of predications we make in ordinary statements, which they did by leaning on their epistemological theory to claim that the subject of predications must be *evident* (which souls and spirits are not!). Their materialist view of persons becomes evident at this juncture, for it seems to be their belief that this 'evident' thing of which predications can be made is the physical totality of the person. And they seemed indeed to believe that in making ordinary statements such as 'I believe *x*' the subject of 'believe' which we must know in making the statement is this physical mereological sum, thus slipping between the first person perspective and the physical.

In the question of personal identity, their thinking follows the same template, disarming in its simplicity: since in making ordinary judgements about the attributes of human beings we must know the physical totality as the subject of predications, and since we are capable of making ordinary judgments of identity and we know that Zayd who willed such and such yesterday is identical to Zayd who wills such and such today, what remains the same must be the physical mereological sum. The argument is also cast in terms of one's knowledge of one's own identity. So the upshot is this: there must be a certain set of material parts for every person which remains constant throughout a lifetime, underwriting our judgements of identity. The material parts necessary for identity are not the entire aggregate of parts we actually comprise, and the rule of thumb which the Mu'tazilites suggested (in which they were followed by numerous later thinkers) was that there was a fundamental minimum of body parts which human beings needed in order to stay alive; this fundamental minimum was what constituted each person's identity.

The general thrust of the argument is to derive the constitutive from the epistemic. But whatever else we may make of it, it would seem that the Mu'tazila simply begged the question. For the argument *presupposes* the truth of our judgements of identity, and on the premise that it is necessary that we be able to make these judgments, it tries to reach the conditions under which this would be possible, thereby deducing the criterion of identity which must support these judgments.

One thing to note is that this lofty transcendental deduction did not proceed entirely unruffled by the challenges of empirical reality, and especially that most unsavoury aspect of it which the possibility of cannibalism represented. For if it was possible that matter belonging to one person and constitutive of its identity could be assimilated into another's body, this meant that there were circumstances in which the criterion of identity devised might fail to pick out a single individual. Here an ignorance of biological facts proved a great asset (our theologians were certainly no great natural scientists!), and the Mu'tazilites dealt with the problem by helping themselves to the unfortunately verifiable assumption that the parts of the person composing the fundamental minimum were not among those affected by one's nutritive habits. So the parts of the person that would be consumed would not be incorporated into that fundamental minimum of the person consuming them, and therefore there was no possibility of an overlap in the objects of knowledge occurring in judgments about the consumer and judgments about the consumed. Evidently, this view of the facts meant that they didn't have to face any of the difficulties that arise from a perpetual change in matter, such as the possibility that I might have more than one continuer whose constituent matter dates from different times of my life.

Putting aside this bit of biological ignorance, the point remains that this argument, far from establishing identity, appears to assume it. In addition though, even if we were to let it pass muster, it would only address the question of identity which might arise while the material parts of a person continue to exist – during his lifetime or after his death, where they enter into different mereological combinations. But the problem of identity for scattered objects, in which the parts continue to exist though in different configurations, seems less refractory to our intuitions than that posed by objects whose parts cease to exist, as is the case with the material parts which God annihilates and then recreates on the Day of Judgment. So how is the temporal gap which opens so steeply between this world and the next to be bridged?

There is little need to recall what I said at the beginning about the difference in aims and standards that separates their world from our own – these differences will have made themselves felt already. But the difference becomes more pronounced

through the artless Mu'tazilite response to the question of the gap: it is the continuity of God's knowledge that underwrites the identity of these parts during their non-existence. Students in Islamic thought might fault me here for speaking of 'artlessness', because in reality the question opens out one of the most contentious and complex issues to be debated in medieval theology, which concern the status of non-existent objects. The Mu'tazila (a good many of them at least) had courted controversy by defending the view that 'the non-existent is a thing' and they had taken quite a bit of flak for this from opposing theological schools who felt that this reification of non-existents threatened to introduce objects co-eternal with God.

Lest this view of non-existents raise a charge harsher than mere artlessness against these theologians, I need to say a word or two on how they understood it. According to them the broadest category in reality was 'thing' and it included as subdivisions the categories of 'existent' and 'non-existent', and to say that 'thing' is a category in *reality* means that it is not merely to be understood as a mental object. The reasons why they came to profess this view were partly exegetical – one proof-text was a verse in the Qur'an that depicts God's creative act in the form of the command 'Be!' addressed to a 'thing' that does not yet exist. In the more developed forms of the theory, the non-existent was closely identified with the possible, which includes both possibles that have not yet been actualised but also possibles that were actualised in the past but have passed out of existence. In formulating their claims, the Mu'tazila were very much guided by a concern to establish non-existents as objects of divine knowledge and power.

So one can see why a sophisticated defence of some such claim would be directly relevant to a theory of personal identity. In fact, *later* Islamic theologians commenting on the question of resurrection explicitly brought out the relevance of this claim to the theory of personal identity, though, by that time, the importance of the Mu'tazila had waned and these theologians tended to belong to schools which rejected this view of non-existents and therefore could not make use of the solution it allowed. Yet the fact is that the Mu'tazila themselves do not seem to have realised the full significance of this connection in the way the later commentators did, or to have tried to exploit its potential. In formulating their theory they seemed far more interested in possibles that have not yet been actualised than in the status of possible entities that have existed in the past. They also seem far more interested in non-existents at the *atomic* level, and not the level of atomic aggregates such as human beings. And finally, the resources of their theory in its developed state only seem to enable us to distinguish non-existents at the level of *classes* of things, not *particular individuals*, which is what we need for claims of identity that hold for persons.

It would be difficult to present the details of this areas of Mu'tazilite thought without getting embroiled in mazes of textual interpretation, and perhaps what does most to discourage one from doing this is that, as I believe at least, the difficulties of obtaining a satisfactory translation of the concerns and conceptual idioms of these thinkers into an idiom which is meaningful to us are, in *this* particular case, too great to be worth the effort it would require.

So what would have been needed here would have been a rigorous spelling out of the status of human beings as non-existents, of the epistemology involved, and most probably also some ontological account of the identity of atoms and their individuation by virtue of the atomic totalities to which they belong or once belonged. And perhaps the last point would be the most important one for the Mu'tazila, for from their position we could bring ourselves to imagine a scene of creation in which God produces the primordial batch of atoms within which *certain* atoms are

‘earmarked’ with the particular fate of constituting a human body in the future. God makes sure that the atoms that will make me will not make any other being that needs to be resurrected along with me, and God will be following these atoms with his eyes as it were throughout eternity. But the Mu’tazila left it to us to iron out how atoms can be individuated, and in the meantime we lost the motivation to take up such a task.

So the Mu’tazilite strategy of solving the question of personal identity by reliance on God’s knowledge of the material parts that form its basis strikes us as artless, as just another way of turning up our hands and saying, ‘God just knows’. I said in the beginning that what we find among many Muslim theologians of this time is that identity is essentially not problematised. What I’m more interested to follow up on here is the fact that the tendency to consider questions of personal identity much more obvious than we would, and also the broader attachment to common sense which the Mu’tazila showed - these combined with a complete disregard of the obvious and the commonsense in our ordinary judgments of identity and with a failure to preserve the phenomena.

Their commitment to commonsense comes out for example in their obstinate refusal to accept any notion of soul or spirit as so much esoteric hocus-pocus. And it is definitely the spirit in which they put forward their materialist view of persons – for the essential part of the person has to be something that is immediately knowable, and therefore something visible, material. Yet at the same time, when this materialism is translated into a view on personal identity, it has the unexpected consequence that the appearance of a person ceases to matter. One of the possible answers to the problem of identity which the Mu’tazila entertained was that perhaps the criterion had something to do with the appearance of persons. And it is said that some of the earlier members of the school believed that the resurrected individual would be identical to the one existing in this life only if the accident which corresponded to the physical appearance was reproduced the same as it was before. Their reasoning took off from common sense and ordinary judgments: the way we *distinguish* between Zayd and ‘Amr (the Arabic version of Tom and Joe) is through the way they look. But the later school rejected this view – on grounds which it would take more than a few words to explain - and took the view I’ve already described.

The paradoxical consequence of the view which the later members settled on was that there was no guarantee that the person who would be recreated on the Day of Judgment would look anything like the person who existed before, because, taking one’s appearance as a function of how the constituents of the person should be organised, the conditions which they set down for the organisation of the atomic totality were minimal. In fact there seemed to be only one explicit condition: that the totality be organised in a way that allows the accidents of life to inhere; and there was a minimum of atoms needed in order for the necessary organisation to come off. But there was no reason why satisfying this condition would yield anything like what we know and see as human beings, firstly because, as the Mu’tazila observed, we could lose many parts without losing our life. But in addition, animals and angels are also atomic totalities in which life inheres, and their appearance is as diverse as that of ants and antelopes and jinn (to the extent that the latter *appear!*). Who could tell as what kind of thing we would return? There *was* a feeble attempt to suggest that the result would look within the bounds of the human, but it was only a feeble attempt, and overall little interest was shown in the entire question – not surprisingly, perhaps, because the Mu’tazila did not consider ‘humanity’ as a distinct ontological category on which special value was placed.

The Mu'tazilite indifference to how beings appear seems out of keeping with their usual concern with the commonsense, for common sense and ordinary judgments of identity give an important place to appearance – and this may be in part a manifestation of the importance which spatiotemporal continuity has in our judgments of identity. But it's also because body and mind cannot be so rigidly separated (one of the lessons Wittgenstein left us with in saying that 'the human body is the best picture of the human soul'). Character comes to lodge itself in a face (*especially* the face), we learn to read a person off it. I am not entirely sure how to place this twist of Mu'tazilite thinking, but I think part of the explanation would have to be that the Mu'tazila were here dazzled by their very acute awareness of the contingency of being. This modal awareness is one of the greater features of their thinking; and it is both promoted by their atomistic metaphysics but also is already implicit in it. It is as if the thinking encouraged by this system is premised on the imagined possibility that, before objects cohered before us as they do, their atomic constituents existed separately. One is drawn into imagining the break-up of entities, into a counterfactual sort of thinking which always tugs at the givenness of entities and makes one consider how differently things might have been.

This can be seen in the way they think about the structure that organises the material parts of human beings. This structure is typically conceived in terms of the metaphysics of accidents: there is an accident which corresponds to the *phenomenal* fact that we are structured in a given way. 'In a given way' – but actually the Mu'tazila seem to be interested rather in the fact that we are structured *at all*, as against – well, as against a scattered quantity of atoms bearing no relation to each other. It is as if the atoms are first imagined in separation, prior to their existing as part of an atomic totality, and then when we turn from this envisioned possibility to the actuality before us – the cohesive, solid body we see – we have brought ourselves in a position where we *feel* the contingency of this fact and we feel the need for postulating a metaphysical entity (namely the accident) which explains how this cohesion is possible, or, more accurately, which realises or essentialises this cohesion. But this counterfactual vision makes us look at entities so far away, and so far in advance of, their particularity – it imagines away so much of it – that it somehow never reaches the point where it can be sensitive to the particularities of the individual, and stops at a much more austere or generic account of the person. From the distance from which they look at things, 'how the individual looks' cannot matter much. This distance continues though to jostle side by side with the Mu'tazilite emphasis on the perceptual and the common sense.

Here I'll have to bring my short account to a close and I would like to conclude by repeating what I've already stressed: these thinkers simply did not find the difficulties posed by questions of personal identity as compelling as we do. Yet I will stand by what I said in the beginning, that the contrast between these very different worldviews and the evaluations of problems they generate is what makes for an enormous part of the interest of these views. The world of these thinkers is of course too different from our own for us to be able to approach them with a view to appropriating their insights and adapting them as solutions for our own problems.

It hasn't been easy to decide whether the benefits of translating their idioms into ones recognisable to a Western philosophical audience outweigh the benefits of keeping these idioms and displaying them in their strangeness, and in the illuminating contrasts which what is unfamiliar can create. I will be happy if I think I've succeeded in striking a balance between these different notions of the aim.