

Social Conservatism for the Common Good
A Protestant Engagement with Robert P. George
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Bringing Body and Soul (Back) Together Again

Robert P. George, Oliver O'Donovan, and the Place of Resurrection in Body Ethics

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In the thirteenth canto of his *Inferno*, Dante enters the forest of the suicides. The pilgrim hears howls of suffering but sees no one. At the behest of Virgil, Dante breaks off a branch of a nearby tree and is met by a cry of outraged pain. Only then does he discover that those who destroyed their bodies on earth have become trees in their torment. It is a memorable scene. Despite his extensive knowledge of Thomas Aquinas and his account of natural law, Dante instead emphasizes the inability of natural reason and poetic imagination to grasp the nature of the suicides' punishment. Virgil is both Dante's philosophical and poetical mentor. Yet the pagan thinker emphasizes how *incredible* the real punishment would be if one only has Virgil's writings: at the outset, he suggests that Dante will see a punishment that "would seem to strip my words of truth."¹ Dante underscores natural reason's limits by framing the punishment in explicitly theological terms. Just as "doubting Thomas" needed to touch Jesus to confirm his faith, so Dante the pilgrim must break a branch to discover the truth. Though they will receive their bodies back in the general resurrection, they are denied the dignity of being clothed with them again: in a parody of Christ's death on the cross, the suicides' bodies will hang, like Judas once did, from a tree.² There is a sense here that suicide is so unique that natural reason can only dimly grasp the scope of its wrongness.

Dante's narrative rests upon a deep commitment to the paramount importance of the body for the moral life—a vision shared by Robert George, who over the course of his career has been a prominent defender of the body's centrality to human flourishing.³ On George's account, biological life is an "essential and intrinsic aspect of a human person."⁴ Human beings are animals—sensing, bodily organisms who endure through time. While we are organisms, though,

¹ Dante, *Inferno*, canto 13, line 50. The Italian is *la cost incredibile*. Dante, *Inferno*, trans. Robert Hollander (New York: Anchor Books, 2002), 239.

² Dante, *Inferno*, canto 13, lines 103–5.

³ My indebtedness to Professor George runs deep, as does my gratitude. I found my way into thinking about the body as an undergraduate by reading Plato and Saint Paul. I was guided through the latter by philosopher Dallas Willard's *Spirit of the Disciplines*. My thought on the subject was deepened by John Paul II's *Theology of the Body*. Yet it was George's work on the body that crystallized its importance for contemporary controversies and helped me grasp more clearly the often tacit—but sometimes overt—gnostic disregard for the body at work in liberal ethics.

⁴ George has developed his view both on his own and through collaborations with Patrick Lee, Christopher Tollefsen, and others. I hope they do not regard it as a slight if, for convenience's sake, I attribute coauthored pieces to George alone in the body of this essay. See Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, *Body-Self Dualism in Contemporary Ethics and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

there is a “radical difference in kind” between us and other species, as humans are capable of “spiritual actions,” such as the inferential insight required for *modus tollens*. Humans are animals and persons. That is, we are animals with a rational nature, which is constituted by having the “basic, natural capacities . . . for conceptual thought and deliberation and free choice.”⁵ This means that every substance of a rational nature—every human body, every human person—has moral worth. And it means that the “basic goods” that underwrite practical action perfect and fulfill the animal organisms who we are. Because the human body is the person, we should not regard it as an instrument for attaining a pleasure or end that does not genuinely perfect the body. On George’s understanding, many contemporary moral controversies arise from the conflict between his hylomorphic account (that human persons are a body-soul composite) and a resurgent gnosticism that regards the “self as a pure consciousness” and “the body as a mere extrinsic tool.”⁶ By dividing the person from the body, gnostic liberals have grounds to argue that some bodies (such as embryos) are not persons and to dismiss the centrality of biology for morally licit norms of life (as in gay marriage).⁷

George’s diagnosis of the gnostic roots of contemporary liberalism might be new to many evangelicals, but it was shared by a variety of twentieth-century Protestant moral theologians. For instance, Paul Ramsey once wrote that the “acids of modern liberalism” have eaten away at the moral bonds of marriage, intergenerational piety, and the connection between “conscious life and nascent life.”⁸ Yet the dissolution of these bonds, he went on, has its roots within “the death of the bond of soul with body in the understanding of personal life in a dualistic age.” Indeed, Ramsey saw such a dissolution as a unique threat to Protestantism. While the task of Roman Catholicism was to overcome the “rigidity and seeming ‘naturalism’” of the moral bonds between conjugal love and procreation, the “task facing Protestantism is the often quite unacknowledged need to forge them again.”⁹ Ramsey’s most important bioethical work was self-consciously founded on an unequivocal endorsement of the body: as “man is a sacredness in the social and political order, so he is a sacredness in the natural, biological order.”¹⁰ Channeling none other than Karl Barth, Ramsey went on to say, “He is a sacredness in bodily life. . . . He is an embodied soul or ensouled body.”¹¹

The question of the body’s place within theological ethics poses something of a paradox. On the one side, the body has a unique and fundamental place for our knowledge of natural law: we have no more intimate or extensive knowledge of the human nature that moral norms are tied to than the knowledge of our flesh. As Saint Paul writes in Ephesians 5:29, “No one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it.” Suicide is incoherent because it contradicts this

⁵ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 94.

⁶ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 2.

⁷ Robert P. George, “Gnostic Liberalism,” *First Things*, December 2016, 34–35.

⁸ Paul Ramsey, “Responsible Parenthood: An Essay in Ecumenical Ethics,” *Religion in Life* 36, no. 3 (1967): 343.

⁹ Ramsey, “Responsible Parenthood,” 343.

¹⁰ Paul Ramsey, *The Patient as Person: Explorations in Medical Ethics*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), xlvi.

¹¹ Ramsey, *Patient as Person*, xlvi. In *Church Dogmatics*, Barth describes Jesus as “one whole man, embodied soul and ensouled body.” See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2010), 3.2:327.

principle, fundamentally severing a person from the basis for that individual's very self. On the other side, our knowledge of the body's inclinations can be distorted. We may not hate our flesh, but it can sometimes seem as though our flesh hates us. In sickness, in starvation, in depression that rewires our brain chemistry, in chronic pain—our bodies turn against us and disrupt the integration of self and body that we otherwise unreflectively enjoy. We are never more alienated from our flesh than when in pain. We shout “*it hurts*” when we stub our toe precisely because in that moment our toe seems more like a broken instrument than part of ourselves. Temporary seasons of alienation are ordinary aspects of maturation and aging. Teenagers going through puberty must learn anew what it means to live within their bodies. Such a transition is disorienting: learning to love our flesh takes time. Our bodies often seem to have a will of their own, which rages against our will. The unity of body and soul must be learned and embraced.

Here I want to explore what an evangelical ethic might contribute to the task of keeping body and soul together in the face of the gnostic liberalism George has rightly critiqued. My exploration is sympathetic to George's hylomorphism; on the details of the metaphysics, I have no disagreement. Yet, like Dante, I worry that the philosophical resources that George's natural law theory provides may be an insufficiently potent prophylactic against the emerging challenges of our liberal regime—especially the efforts to extend life indefinitely and to rewrite the contents of human nature itself. Philosophy might not be able to sufficiently secure the “sacredness” of humanity's biological life on its own terms. Yet that is not to say that theology can dispense with nature or her laws. Indeed, an evangelical ethic that starts from the resurrection of Jesus Christ must acknowledge the immediacy and intimacy we have with our bodies and the centrality of that bodily experience for understanding the world. While Protestant theologians like Paul Ramsey have been averse to founding ethical norms on our apprehension of natural law outside the revelation of Christ, they have also struggled to integrate their doctrines into ethics—proving, paradoxically, the enduring power of natural law for moral reasoning.¹² To undertake this exploration, then, I first offer a few appreciative questions about Robert George's account before turning to Ramsey's student Oliver O'Donovan's effort to incorporate nature into a thoroughgoing evangelical ethics. Such a juxtaposition helps clarify, I hope, what beginning with the resurrection can and cannot do for an ethic of our flesh.

Robert George on the Body

George's “new” natural law theory unequivocally rejects any derivation of moral norms from theoretical descriptions of human nature, yet it does so without severing the link between the

¹² At this point in his work, Ramsey gives a theological foundation for his endorsement of the body's “sacredness.” At the outset of his preface, he includes the “sanctity of life” as among those “moral and religious premises” that he must make explicit. Ramsey, *Patient as Person*, xlv. Only two years previously, in a substantive defense of a nondualistic anthropology, Ramsey introduced the same formulation with the qualification that it arises from the “religious outlooks and ‘on-looks’ that have been traditional to us.” There, Ramsey is explicit that the sanctity of human life has an origin “alien to him,” such that it matters little for the morality of abortion whether we think life begins at conception or no. Paul Ramsey, “The Morality of Abortion,” in *Life or Death: Ethics and Options* (Portland, OR: Reed College, 1968), 72. Three years after *Patient as Person*, Ramsey moved the theological foundation to the center of the expression: “Human beings are a sacredness, under God, in the biological order.” Ramsey, “Abortion: A Review Article,” *The Thomist* 37, no. 1 (1973): 181.

goods of human life and our nature. Our judgment of what is to be done is founded upon our knowledge of “basic goods,” which are “the intrinsic aspects of human fulfillment.”¹³ These goods—which include friendship, life, marriage, religion, and knowledge—are “genuinely *fulfilling* or *perfective* of us and others like us.”¹⁴ As such, they supply us with ultimate reasons for action: they are irreducible answers to why one is doing something, as they are sufficient on their own to motivate a person to act and are “intelligibly choiceworthy for their own sakes,” rather than only intelligible for the sake of some other end.¹⁵ Our knowledge of basic goods is grounded not on our experiences of enjoying life or marriage or on the intuitions that such experiences might give rise to. Rather, the basic goods are self-evident: their choice worthiness is a practical insight, a “rational apprehension that being healthy [or being married or having knowledge] is an aspect of human flourishing, worthy of pursuit and protection.”¹⁶ Such a practical insight recognizes the unique opportunity that an individual has to perfect himself. Still, the basic goods are connected to human nature, even if our knowledge of them is not derived from metaphysical speculation about human nature. However new George’s view is, it is still a natural law account: as aspects of *human* flourishing, a full philosophical explication of basic goods and their role in ethics requires some discussion of what constitutes human nature.¹⁷

While our knowledge of basic goods is not derived from metaphysics, George employs metaphysics to dialectically defend basic goods against those who reject them.¹⁸ On George’s hylomorphic account, human persons are a body-soul composite, individuals whose animal

¹³ Patrick Lee and Robert P. George, *Conjugal Union: What Marriage Is and Why It Matters* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 22.

¹⁴ Lee and George, *Conjugal Union*, 26 (emphasis theirs).

¹⁵ Lee and George, *Conjugal Union*, 24.

¹⁶ Lee and George, *Conjugal Union*, 27.

¹⁷ As George and Lee acknowledge, the “naturalist approach is correct to hold that moral norms are in some way grounded in human nature.” Lee and George, *Conjugal Union*, 36. Mark Murphy has distinguished between weak and strong natural law theories, and he thinks that natural law theories must be of the strong variety but that on such a theory, basic goods cannot be self-evident since they require human nature to explain them. Mark C. Murphy, *Natural Law and Practical Rationality*, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy and Law (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 16. What Murphy misses about George’s teacher John Finnis—and I think George as well—is that the contents of “human nature” are known only through basic goods. Thus, practical reason has epistemic priority for understanding human nature—even if human nature is ontologically prior. John Finnis, *Reason in Action* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 5–6.

¹⁸ George suggests that speculative arguments can cast doubt on self-evident practical truths but can also be “employed affirmatively in support of a self-evident practical truth, often with persuasive force.” While there “can be no ‘evidence’ of ‘self-evidence,’” George thinks that theoretical or metaphysical arguments can “remove doubts about their truth.” See Robert P. George, *In Defense of Natural Law* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 62–63. This dialectical approach is, I suspect, partially why George’s natural law theory has been developed in rather limited and spectacular directions. That is, it has been invoked on questions of marriage, abortion, euthanasia, and transgender rights—rather than on questions of markets and the economy, environmentalism, or other questions of ethics that are not immediately tied to the nature of the body.

bodies have a formal principle of unity and life, namely, a rational soul.¹⁹ Where substance-dualist accounts would locate the person in the soul, and materialist accounts deny the soul altogether, George's hylomorphism argues that the human person *is* a living body *with* a rational soul. George builds his defense of humans' animality out of the mundane, quotidian reality of sensation, which he argues is a bodily phenomenon and thus incompatible with substance dualism. The human soul does not depend on the body for all of its functions, such as willing or engaging in conceptual thought, and thus can survive the death of the body. At the same time, the soul is functionally dependent on the body: while it is conceivable that an immaterial entity (such as an angel) might reason without matter, the human soul is "naturally dependent upon sensation and thus is by nature incomplete."²⁰ As such, if a soul exists without the body, its functioning is impeded and "unnatural."²¹ The subject of action is, properly speaking, the *whole human being*—a body-soul composite.

Such a position enables George to escape two interrelated threats. First, the fact that human persons are animals means we are not constituted by our experiences of the world, which are preserved for us in the form of psychological continuity.²² Persons come into being when the living organism that is one's body is conceived and go out of existence when that same organism has died. As such, the person enjoys numerically identical continuity across time within the body one has—even if that individual does not experience psychological or biological continuity. What matters, on this view, is achieving the goods that really are fulfilling of this organism, rather than having experiences or sensations or pleasures that might be (temporarily) satisfactory but offer no real perfective value.

The ethical upshot of this is that bodies cannot be instrumentalized for the sake of pursuing pleasures or experiences that would attract us but not be genuinely fulfilling or perfective of our persons. In his rejoinder to Robert Nozick's vaunted "experience machine" thought experiment, George argues that the body must not be regarded as fungible for the sake of a satisfaction or enjoyment that might be had without it. As the thought experiment goes, we can imagine a machine that would give users the pleasure of engaging in an activity like playing a piano sonata without actually doing so. One plausible conclusion from the thought experiment is that we should care about *doing* things, rather than simply *experiencing* them. But George goes a step further, arguing that choices to pursue a pleasure or satisfaction apart from a genuinely perfective end reduce real goods to experiences of pleasure and so always involve some "retreat from reality into fantasy." If the "experience" could be had in some way besides undertaking a fulfilling activity in the body, then the body becomes "a mere external means to one's end—a state existing in consciousness."²³ As a moral theory, hedonism rests on a dualism that regards the source of the pleasurable sensations or feelings as immaterial to our evaluation of what one is doing: every hedonistic choice, "by its nature, involves reducing the real world—including our

¹⁹ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 66–67.

²⁰ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 68.

²¹ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 73.

²² Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 34–37. George and Lee bring together Derek Parfit's account of personal identity with Robert Nozick's "experience machine" and demonstrate how both have an account of personal identity that is founded on psychological states.

²³ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 112.

bodies and others—to the level of replaceable and dispensable means of obtaining an effect in one’s consciousness.”²⁴

Second, George’s hylomorphism and its endorsement of a rational soul preserves the uniqueness of human dignity against views that would ascribe the equivalent moral value to every species by attaching it to characteristics that come in degrees, like sentience, consciousness, self-awareness, and rationality. For George, “being a substance *with a rational nature* is the criterion for moral worth.”²⁵ This nature expresses itself through activities particular to the species, which George argues include conceptual thought and free will.²⁶ Yet the criterion for moral worth is only *having* this nature, not actualizing it.²⁷ And possession of a nature is not a matter of degree. For George, *persons* themselves are valuable for themselves, not as “vehicles for what is intrinsically valuable.”²⁸ Even if persons are not in a position to actualize their nature, we must regard them as ends in themselves and not damage their pursuit of a basic good in seeking basic goods for ourselves because they possess a rational nature that has full moral worth.²⁹

George’s metaphysics and affirmation of the unique value of human beings makes the basic good of human organic life inviolable.³⁰ George’s claim that persons are intrinsically valuable in themselves, rather than as vectors for other valuable qualities or attributes, might seem incommensurate with the notion that basic goods are themselves intrinsically choice worthy and that, as such, they are the final reasons for action. After all, knowledge, marriage, friendship, and so on are not *persons*. Yet there are two important caveats to this claim.

First, basic goods *perfect* persons, so that to choose them in some practical context affirms and seeks to bring into being a dimension or aspect of a particular individual’s life. In that way,

²⁴ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 107.

²⁵ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 86, emphasis George’s.

²⁶ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 52–65.

²⁷ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 82–83.

²⁸ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 86.

²⁹ On the “radical” capacity, see Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 82–83, 119–30. The basic goods are not just for an individual, but for *everyone like me*. Moreover, communion with others is itself a basic human good. As such, it would be inconsistent for us to pursue fulfillment for ourselves while not respecting others’ pursuit of fulfillment. As a result, the “thought of the golden rule, basic fairness, occurs early on in moral reflection.” Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 93.

³⁰ This is part of the difficulty of articulating and defending the claim that organic, bodily human life is a good in itself that must be respected. For John Finnis, the basic good of life can be more or less perfectly instantiated: “One may well be overwhelmed by the distance between [the vegetative existence of a person in irreversible coma] and the integral good of a flourishing person. Nobody wants to be in such a condition, and no decent person wants to see anyone else living like that. The good of human life is indeed very inadequately instantiated in such a person’s life. Still, the life of a person in irreversible coma remains human life; *it is a good, however deprived*. True, life of such a deprived and unhealthy kind has little appeal. . . . No human good, considered apart from integral human fulfillment, has the appeal which each of the components of that ideal enjoys when all of them are considered together.” John Finnis, Joseph M. Boyle, and Germain Grisez, *Nuclear Deterrence, Morality, and Realism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 305–6.

basic goods are transparent for persons. We might say that while human beings are intrinsically *valuable*, basic goods are intrinsically *choice worthy*—where the latter names their role in guiding concrete decisions.

Second, biological life is one of the basic goods and, in a sense, a presupposition to our attainment of the other basic goods. As George notes, it is odd to think that “the fulfillment of an entity is intrinsically valuable, and yet the entity itself is not.” Viewing one’s biological organism as valuable only instrumentally or conditionally (because one values consciousness or the activities that are possible to mature, healthy human beings) implicitly identifies oneself with something besides that bodily entity and thus engages in a dualism that denigrates one’s bodily life and demeans the person. On George’s account, it is impossible to regard one’s *whole self* as instrumentally or conditionally valuable: “One must value, at least implicitly, one’s own being or preservation as in itself good.”³¹ In that way, organic life functions as a presupposition for one’s freedom to pursue other basic goods. Crucially, this entails that death is an assault on the good of the person, as it both impedes the individual’s opportunity to pursue other valuable basic goods and attacks one’s participation in the basic good of (organic) life. As George writes, death “itself is never a dignity—it is, in a way, the supreme indignity.” This supplies a reason *against* “hastening death,” rather than a reason for choosing it.³²

There is much to commend this account of the body. Yet I wonder whether it can bear the moral weight that George asks of it or whether the body’s centrality to the moral life ultimately relies on our knowledge of Christ’s resurrection. One challenge arises from efforts to indefinitely postpone death or render it unnecessary through the development of antiaging therapies. If the good of human (bodily) life is intrinsically choice worthy, then we always have reason to extend it, regardless of the costs of doing so. Such a worry arises, I think, if body and soul are kept together *only* on the basis of nature and philosophical reason, as within those terms death remains a potent enemy—rather than the defeated, disarmed enemy of 1 Corinthians 15.³³

To be clear, the good of life is not the only reason for action we have in the face of death: its positive, directive force is not obligatory in the way that the prohibition against taking human life is obligatory.³⁴ Yet that means opposing indefinite life-extension projects can only be prudential, rather than principled: the possibility of damaging other basic goods in seeking to live forever might stop us from making the attempt. But we might also conclude that because the basic good of life is necessary for *any* participation in the basic goods, such damage would be permissible to

³¹ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 161.

³² Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 173.

³³ Throughout 1 Cor. 15, Paul refers to those who have died in Christ as those who “sleep” (15:6, 18, 20, 51). Such imagery does not sanction choosing death, but it also might preclude choosing against death in perpetuity.

³⁴ Crucially, new natural law proponents affirm an asymmetry between positive and negative norms, in which the directive force of positive reasons is only suggestive but the force of prohibitions is absolute. Finnis argues that the “reasons *for* my choosing are infinite in number.” Our finitude means we cannot pursue every good option, and so there is not a single right decision in every situation. But we can also “refrain from doing anything.” That is, we can respect the negative, exceptionless norms that the “reasons *against*” supply for us. In that sense, reasons for and reasons against are asymmetrical in their force and normative power. See Finnis, *Reason in Action*, 226–30.

accept (on grounds of double effect).³⁵ New natural law proponents' position that the basic goods are incommensurable in practical situations cuts a variety of ways. It prohibits aggregating the damages to basic goods in order to know what one should do, which would effectively be a form of consequentialism. But it also might entail that one could reasonably accept such damages (provided one does not choose them) while pursuing, to the bitter end, a single basic good. When that basic good makes all the others possible, as life does, such a choice seems especially reasonable.

We might invoke related challenges from the desolate lands of technofuturist fantasies, where the aim of technological development is to make ourselves post- or transhuman. For such views, the charge of dualism is not an objection, and the defense of bodies on the basis of human nature is a nonstarter. If the pursuit of indefinite life extension has sacralized nature, post- and transhuman fantasies have turned against her outright. Yet it is just such a blatant rejection of nature that undercuts appeals to her as a philosophical source: the unavailability of empirical evidence (of any kind) of the badness of such projects leaves philosophical critiques rather shorthanded.

Such possibilities may not trouble George's account of abortion, euthanasia, and marriage as resting on the affirmation of the dignity of the human body, but they do raise questions about the extent to which the body and soul can be kept together without appealing to the resurrection of Jesus Christ. Consider the place of the postmortem self in George's argument. George suggests that philosophy "can provide strong evidence for the conclusion that the soul, in fact, does survive death." Yet if the body transfers to the soul some of its powers, and the soul subsists beyond the life of the body, then we might wonder whether the person *becomes* the soul. As George recognizes, the soul that subsists beyond the life of the body "is not, strictly speaking, the same substance that understands and wills before death and after death."³⁶ Such a conclusion would be unhappy for George's animalism, to be sure. But why is the soul not the same substance after death? Without the Christian doctrine of the resurrection of the body somewhere in the background, it seems plausible to think that the soul persisting after death is the same substance that understood and willed prior to death. Such a position would come near to the view of Aristotle, whose hylomorphism seems to be commensurate with the ongoing subsistence of *something* beyond the death of the body but that also seems to regard personal immortality as an impossibility.³⁷ Like George, Thomas Aquinas sees his account of the soul's inclination toward the body as a reason to accept the resurrection of Christ, but we might wonder whether the resurrection supplies grounds for Aquinas to read Aristotle in the manner he does, since it is a

³⁵ The "doctrine of double effect" allows that causing harm as a side effect of pursuing a good is acceptable, even though directly causing that harm to pursue a good would not be. The account of intention and double effect is a crucial part of the new natural law proponents' view. Among other places, see Finnis's critique of proportionalism in John Finnis, *Fundamentals of Ethics* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1983), 85ff.

³⁶ Lee and George, *Body-Self Dualism*, 73.

³⁷ See Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1111b19–30. "How does an element which is divine, eternal, impassive find lodgement in and association with the mortal organism which has in it nothing that can survive the death of the material body? To this question Aristotle has no answer." Patrick Duncan, "Immortality of the Soul in the Platonic Dialogues and Aristotle," *Philosophy* 17, no. 68 (November 1942): 319.

unique event that expands humanity's imagination and opens up new lines of argument about the relationship between body and soul.

The question about the resurrection's role in determining the body's place in ethics also has a practical dimension, which arises when we reflect on what we should do when human nature turns against itself through sin. Those who pursue experiences based on "feelings" rather than goods diminish their ability to grasp the goodness of the goods they have rejected. Though the body recalcitrantly inclines toward its flourishing even when we reject such inclinations, destructive choices eventually turn our flesh against itself. People using illicit recreational drugs might have accepted a tacit dualism, out of which they pursue the "experiences" of satisfaction without the underlying goods. Yet their alienation from their nature in this respect makes appeals to their nature dissatisfactory, for they have in practice already rejected the principle to which one is appealing.³⁸ Alienation from the body is a closed circle, from which there is no escape—except by that which comes to the body (in a sense) from beyond it, as in the resurrection from the dead.

There is a puzzle here, then, about whether the metaphysical principle of the soul's union with the body is sufficient to keep body and soul together, when the value of doing so is precisely what is in question. There may be something to Dante's own evangelically mediated construal of the body in *Inferno*, canto 13. If Virgil is incapable of demonstrating the true depths of suicide's violation of the body, other attempts are surely in trouble. An evangelical ethic that is founded on the resurrection offers a surety to the metaphysical principle of the soul's union with the body, but it does so by vindicating the body over and against the forces of death and sin that would tempt us to spurn it. The resurrection gives us grounds to affirm the body's inviolability and centrality to our person with a force not available to natural reason.

Oliver O'Donovan on the Body

Still, matters are not so simple for evangelical ethicists. Even when they claim to found ethics on the resurrection of Jesus, they often revert to nontheological frameworks in wrestling with moral questions that the body gives rise to. Oliver O'Donovan, for instance, once raised worries similar to those offered here against his teacher Paul Ramsey. Despite Ramsey's unequivocal criticism of the bifurcation of body and soul, O'Donovan contends that Ramsey fails to ground body-soul

³⁸ In "Marriage and the Liberal Imagination," George observes that those who fail to grasp the intrinsic value of basic goods "ordinarily do not judge them to be valueless." They might still see a point to marrying, even if they do not recognize its basic goodness. He goes on to suggest, however, that they "cannot imagine . . . why spouses would perform marital acts, not (or not merely) as a means to, or of, procreation, pleasure, expressing feeling and the like, but above all, and decisively, for the sake of marriage itself, understood as actualized in such acts." He observes that the practical insights that marriage has its own intelligible point and that marriage is consummated in the union of male and female cannot be attained "except with strenuous efforts of imagination, by people who, due to personal or cultural circumstances, have little acquaintance with marriage thus understood." As such, whatever undermines the "sound understanding and practice of marriage in a culture . . . makes it difficult for people to grasp the intrinsic value of marriage and marital intercourse." Such a discrepancy indicates that George is ambivalent about how optimistic we should be that "imagination" can secure our perception of the basic goods when our knowledge of them has become corrupted. See George, *In Defense of Natural Law*, 143.

unity *theologically*. Ramsey rejected the Platonic and Aristotelian accounts of the soul, since the former reduces bodily life “to an acceptable level of indifference” and the latter “reduces the stature, the worth, and the irreplaceable uniqueness of the individual person (long before his dying) to a level of acceptable transiency or interchangeability.”³⁹ Yet on O’Donovan’s reading, the “principle of body-soul unity . . . is not strong enough to bear the weight that Ramsey puts on it.”⁴⁰ The resurrection binds body and soul together *without* reifying biological life in such a way that we are committed to the project of indefinite life extension, and it does so by relativizing the goodness of organic human life and revealing its fundamental determination by God. Moreover, the resurrection plays more than a “merely limiting role” in the relationship of body and soul; it is “the intellectual foundation of [body-soul unity] in Christian thought.”⁴¹

O’Donovan’s assertion that the resurrection grounds our understanding of the body is commensurate with his broader concern to articulate an ethics that arises from the gospel of Jesus Christ, especially from the “resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead.”⁴² On O’Donovan’s account, humanity’s rebellion against God “has not succeeded in destroying the natural order to which he belongs.” But that can be said only on the basis of God’s vindication of that order in the resurrection of Christ. While the ontological grounds for this order are resilient, our epistemological access to it is also limited by sin, such that “any certainty we may have about the order which God has made depends upon God’s own disclosure of himself and of his works.”⁴³ The upshot of this view is that the knowledge of the natural order and its implications for ethics remains “in part,” so that the unbeliever “does not have to be ignorant about the structure of the family, the virtue of mercy, the vice of cowardice or the duty of justice.”⁴⁴ Yet the knowledge of that order is intrinsically incomplete—and *because* it is incomplete, it cannot properly be said to be known at all. Just as adding different endings to Schubert’s *Unfinished Symphony* would transform our understanding of its meaning and significance, so the disclosure of the completion

³⁹ Paul Ramsey, “The Indignity of ‘Death with Dignity,’” *Hastings Center Studies* 2, no. 2 (May 1974): 60–61.

⁴⁰ Oliver O’Donovan, “Keeping Body and Soul Together,” in *Covenants of Life: Contemporary Medical Ethics in Light of the Thought of Paul Ramsey*, ed. Kenneth L Vaux and Mark Stenberg, *Philosophy and Medicine* 77 (London: Springer, 2011), 42.

⁴¹ O’Donovan, “Keeping Body and Soul Together,” 43.

⁴² Oliver O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order: An Outline for Evangelical Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1986), 11, 13.

⁴³ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 19. O’Donovan contends that considerable confusion has arisen in theology from not properly ordering the ontological and epistemological dimensions of ethics, which has led to a polarized choice “between an ethic that is revealed and has no ontological grounding and an ethic that is based on creation and so is naturally known.” On the one hand, then, O’Donovan follows Barth in asserting the epistemological challenge to “natural law” moral reasoning. Yet on his reading, Barth himself failed to properly differentiate the ontological and epistemological issues and so repudiated dimensions of the doctrine of creation “which ought never to have fallen under suspicion.” On the other hand, though, Emil Brunner’s political work discloses that he “understood the theological task as a discrete exercise in cultural accommodation,” which renders it incapable of responding to those liberation theologies that subject theology to the “sectional perceptions of a single cultural group (‘black’ theology, ‘feminist’ theology, *etc.*)” O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 86, 91.

⁴⁴ O’Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, ***.

of history and the moral order in Christ transforms our grasp of them. As O'Donovan writes, "Knowledge of the moral order is a grasp of the total shape in which, if anything is lacking, everything is lacking."⁴⁵ As such, the resurrection of Jesus Christ not only secures or grounds more deeply what is naturally known but provides distinct or unique ethical content itself. Christian ethics means that "certain ethical and moral judgments belong to the gospel itself," that the "church can be committed to ethics without moderating the tone of its voice as the bearer of glad tidings."⁴⁶

Yet if O'Donovan seeks to ground ethics in the resurrection of Jesus, he also attends to the fact that our unique intimacy with our bodies poses a challenge to doing so. In his lectures on bioethics given in 1983, O'Donovan spoke freely of the "natural order" and seemed to give its deliverances something near to a free-standing authority for moral judgments. As he noted near the outset of his lectures, the "relation of human beings to their own bodies is . . . the last frontier of nature." While we might banish birds, trees, and every other mark of nature from our world, we cannot escape the natural: when we take off our clothes to bathe, "we confront our own bodily existence." Such an encounter means that freedom must be one of conformity to "its immanent laws" and that we plan "our activities in cooperation with them." Citing Saint Paul's dictum in Ephesians 5:29 that "no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes it and cherishes it," O'Donovan argues that hating one's own flesh is the "limit of self-contradiction to which our freedom tends." Indeed, warring against our bodies is the terminus to which our self-hatred is drawn, as the worshipers of Baal on Mount Carmel "were impelled to cut themselves with knives."⁴⁷

It is telling for the difficulties of developing a thoroughgoing evangelical ethic that O'Donovan fails to carry through his theological program of grounding ethics in the resurrection in his otherwise astonishingly prescient discussion of transsexualism (or what today has come to be known as transgenderism).⁴⁸ Though much of the chapter is philosophical in its approach, his final observation is "of a more confessionally Christian kind." "The sex," he writes, "into which we have been born . . . is given to us to be welcomed as a gift of God." He goes on, "The task of psychological maturity—for it is a moral task, and not merely an event which may or may not transpire—involves accepting this gift and learning to love it, even though we may have to acknowledge that it does not come to us without problems." It is our responsibility to develop our vocation in accordance with the possibilities given to us in our biological sex. There is no room on this view for quick or hasty dismissals of those who find such a task difficult as 'psychologically disturbed', for the gap between "bodily form as such" and the "problems it poses to us personally in our individual experience" applies well beyond questions of transgenderism. Yet O'Donovan does not reach for the resurrection and the hope for our bodies' repair that such a doctrine gives rise to. Instead, he writes that "responsibility in sexual development implies a responsibility to nature."⁴⁹ That is true, but when it comes to the question of gender dysphoria, the gift of God in creation is precisely what one has been alienated from. The impotence and frustration that one feels in the face of such fragmentation is real, but the

⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 88–89.

⁴⁶ O'Donovan, *Resurrection and Moral Order*, 12. See also xi.

⁴⁷ Oliver O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 6.

⁴⁸ Forty years later, his discussion remains the single most profound treatment of the subject by a Christian theologian.

⁴⁹ O'Donovan, *Begotten or Made?*, 29.

final remedy is only possible when our flesh is raised with Christ's through the Spirit. Those who suffer wait—and by God's grace, they can wait with hope. As we are released from the task of anxiously subduing our flesh, we can be set free to merely live within it—the flawed, and ultimately fatal, flesh that will someday shine with a radiance and glory we cannot begin now to even imagine. Starting from the resurrection generates a very different moral atmosphere (one that, I think, sounds like good news!) than nature ever can.

O'Donovan, then, is willing to appeal to nature when addressing contested moral questions, even while he thinks that nature is insufficient on its own to resolve them. In responding to Robert Adams's rejection of nature as a category for sexual ethics, O'Donovan observes that *natural* and *unnatural* are “terms that come into play when questions arise about how we shall conduct ourselves as embodied souls and ensouled bodies.”⁵⁰ It is possible, he argues, to be too skeptical about what nature can supply for the moral life; if nothing else, nature “knows that life is better than death!” While we need Genesis and the Gospels to understand “life and death theologically as the imprint of our creation and fall,” we do not need them to “tell us that there *is* an order of value in which life is preferable to death.”⁵¹ The “range of features in human existence” that we describe as nature can “clearly ground some moral discernments.” And these can then “point the way to the understanding that a doctrine of creation can supply.” The step from a “philosophy of nature to a theology of creation” does not mean abandoning “one set of interests for another,” then, but rather being directed back to the world to see what intelligibility the goods of nature have in light of their redemption. The “language of ‘nature’ and its concerns for the body-soul relation must be framed within a fully theological account of creation and redemption.”⁵²

At most, then, the goods of nature can “point” the way practical reasoning must go, but they are not so transparent that we can rely on them, especially when nature herself has been called into question. What we need is nearer to what Virgil requires of Dante, namely, *participation* in nature through the Spirit so that we can recognize the goods of nature as they are. Nature can only point the way toward a doctrine of creation; it cannot answer for itself. Such a limit is crucial, since it supplies dialectical resources for responding to moral positions that call the *contents of (human) nature themselves into question*, as in the case of transhumanism, posthumanism, or indefinite life extensions. When human nature itself becomes an object of artifice, no nonviciously circular defense of it can be made. One can only turn outside nature, to the disclosure of Jesus Christ, whose person sanctions human nature even within the limits of death.⁵³

⁵⁰ Oliver O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis : The Gay Controversy and the Anglican Communion* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2008), 91.

⁵¹ O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 96.

⁵² O'Donovan, *Church in Crisis*, 95.

⁵³ O'Donovan makes his Christological resources more explicit in his discussion of embryo research—and for good reason, as such research raises the fundamental question of *who* is a person. See *Begotten or Made?*, 65–66. See also O'Donovan's discussion of the risks of in vitro fertilization and the mastery of the tools of divine providence (including death) that is involved in it. *Begotten or Made?*, 82–83. Gerald McKenny has argued that O'Donovan's acceptance of some sort of variation and change within the realm of nature means that O'Donovan is not able to definitively rule out certain biotechnological interventions. McKenny himself, however, notes that O'Donovan might block such a move by arguing that medicine “should be restricted to the

Conclusion

The body's place in the moral life is a deep puzzle that has animated the very best of moral and philosophical reflection since Plato. George's Thomistic hylomorphism is among the best contemporary accounts of our corporeal lives. It offers a compelling antidote to the incipient and pervasive neognosticism of liberal ethics. Although George mainly develops his view by addressing controversial moral questions, his defense of the body begins in a much more quotidian fashion—with sensation, our basic experience in our bodies of the world around us. There is perhaps a hint here of the therapeutic value of George's view: the moral task of keeping body and soul together might require us to look beyond the arenas of spectacular disagreement, where the war over the body is most apparent, to the hidden and mundane arenas, where our intuitions about the body are constantly being formed.

The above inquiry is not about whether George's metaphysics are right but whether they can bear the weight that is being asked of them. My worry arises from a deep appreciation for George's work and my own ongoing puzzlement over how Christians should navigate ethical controversies. The self-evidence of the basic goods that George defends seems to leave discursive reflection on their metaphysical underpinnings morally inert: if such arguments cannot supply *evidence for* the goodness of life or marriage or any other basic good, then it is not clear on what basis they can defeat objections to them. While some readers of new natural law have regarded it merely as a covert form of accommodating Catholic moral teaching to the canons of public reason, I worry that there is (paradoxically) a logical impasse built into the view: What does it mean to persuade someone of the goodness of a basic good when that goodness is self-evident and undervived?⁵⁴

This is not simply a question of political or public tactics or strategy. Rather, it is a question about how we can secure an account of the body and the moral life in the midst of disagreement. If a liberal ethic severs body from soul, then it is best understood as a disagreement about the content and meaning (and even existence!) of nature itself. The rational instability of defending

treatment of pathologies (that is, to therapy as opposed to enhancement).” Gerald McKenny, *Biotechnology, Human Nature, and Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics 37 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 46. This, however, is more or less what I take O'Donovan to do in his opening chapter of *Begotten or Made?* For instance, he notes, “A medicine which differentiated sharply between interfering in a healthy body and curing a sick one, as Western Christian medicine used to do, preserved an understanding of freedom which respected the constraints of health. But now the challenge is explicit.” *Begotten or Made?*, 6. O'Donovan also has other resources for blocking such a move. Specifically, the natural order is secured and vindicated *by Christ*. What blocks technological interventions is, ultimately, a willingness to respect the uniqueness of divine action in affirming the created order of nature as such.

⁵⁴ George writes that dialectical arguments “may be employed affirmatively in support of a self-evident practical truth, often with persuasive force.” He suggests that the compatibility of the basic goods with anthropological evidence places “something of a burden on anyone who would deny the proposition stating this practical judgment to account for the universality of phenomena such as friendship, intellectual inquiry and worship.” Perhaps. Yet in situations where one person does not grasp an opportunity as intrinsically valuable, it is not clear what “persuasion” means *except* supplying them reasons *on the basis of which* they might affirm the practical conclusion. See George, *In Defense of Natural Law*, 62–63.

nature on its own terms is endemic: there is no amount of metaphysics that can resolve the deep disagreement about nature's meaning with those who reject it at the outset. George's account might have resources to deal with that problem: religion is one of the basic goods, and without it the whole system may be less stable than it appears.⁵⁵ But it is a crucial reminder that even within the terms of new natural law, we cannot ask more of metaphysics for ethics and political controversies than it can supply.

That is not to say that an evangelical ethic can dispense with metaphysics: while the consecration and inviolability of bodily life offered by the incarnation and resurrection of Jesus Christ is irreplaceable, these truths also lack practical specificity for our moral lives. The unwillingness of evangelicals to fully incorporate metaphysics into our moral deliberations has led to our widespread accommodation of practices that distort the character of bodily life by blocking or violating its natural rhythms—like contraception, in vitro fertilization, vasectomies, and milder forms of nontherapeutic, mood-enhancing drugs such as caffeine, marijuana, and so on. Evangelicals' emphasis on the cross has eclipsed our doctrine of creation, preventing us from fully appropriating the moral implications of the fact that Christ's resurrection is the confirmation and validation of creation, a validation that transcends creation's intrinsic possibilities without violating or denigrating them. O'Donovan's evangelical ethics rightly sees within nature "pointers" to the flourishing of the creature, even if those pointers are too epistemically limited to develop an ethic that would effectively answer a world ordered by rejecting them. Evangelicals must affirm nature and her laws.

At the same time, an evangelical ethic's affirmation of nature must be founded on the witness of Christ, which means it offers us something more than the confirmation of what is already known. An evangelical engaging George's metaphysics can offer more than a half-hearted two cheers: embracing hylomorphism means following the "pointers" of the body as far as they can go, while recognizing the limitations of building a moral system—much less a persuasive moral system—out of them. Yet the revelation of nature's meaning and end in Christ means saying a forceful *no* to the broader systemic, institutional, and cultural movements that would overturn nature itself. To that extent, an evangelical ethic is more comprehensive: it can say a strange *yes* to death and a *no* to the attempt to prolong life precisely because it looks beyond death toward a life that the eye cannot see nor can the mind imagine. Its *no* is founded on the basis of that *yes*,

⁵⁵ Finnis grants that if theistic explanations for morality fail, they introduce a "rational instability" into the system itself. The *necessity* of the basic goods that grounds their obligatoriness is "the necessity of our given nature," which "is a necessity only because the divine creative (and unnecessitated) choice opted for this world rather than none and rather than a world containing beings of radically other nature." The source of the instability if this further explanation is denied would come from the "perishability of [the basic goods'] instantiations in fleeting lives," rather than from their content itself. Still, Finnis unequivocally agrees with Mark Murphy's judgment that once the possibility of a theistic explanation for the basic goods is raised, "adherence to the natural law [becomes] rationally unstable in the absence of a certain sort of theistic stance." While a natural law *jurisprudence* might be feasible without such theological underpinnings, a natural law *ethic* is not. John Finnis, "Grounds of Law and Legal Theory: A Response," *Legal Theory* 13, nos. 3–4 (2007): 341. Citing Mark Murphy, "Finnis on Nature, Reason, God," *Legal Theory* 13, nos. 3–4 (2007): 193.

and as such, it can remain fully good news to those who would initially reject it. To that extent, its persuasive power remains—untapped and unrealized.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ I'm indebted to Michael Baldwin and Gary Hartenburg for their feedback on this chapter. I am especially grateful to Beth Butler for discussion and for her editorial assistance, which saved me from a great number of infelicities.