

Organisms and their Bodies: Response to LaPorte

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LaPorte's objection to my first symmetry argument can probably be met by my restating the original argument in a clearer manner. He claims there really is not an asymmetry, or not a problematic one. Rather there is one symmetrical principle that explains the differences between live and dead bodies and this gives us no reason to deny their identity. To become a part of the body something must be assimilated i.e., caught up in the life processes of the organism as a whole. LaPorte offers the general restriction on part replacement that "For a body before death or after, incorporation of new matter is possible just on condition of assimilation." Dead bodies do not assimilate so LaPorte concludes that "naturally there can be no part replacement after death even though there can be part replacement before death." He suggests that there is nothing odd about something getting parts at one time and not at a later time and points out that a city might not be able to any longer extend its boundaries because of natural obstacles when it could earlier.

LaPorte seems to be making a claim that few others who believe in the identity of the living body and the corpse would make: that corpses do not obtain new parts. He may be interpreting my argument as recommending to those who believe in the identity of living bodies and corpses that they should instead doubt the existence of corpses since they must admit that corpses cannot acquire any new parts. Of course, since I do not believe there are corpses, I do not think they can acquire new parts (or retain and lose parts). But the point that I was trying to impress upon those who believe corpses exist is that they acquire (maintain and lose) parts in a *different way* than the living organism. I never claimed that believers in the existence of corpses should recognize that corpses do not acquire parts and therefore be perplexed that they acquire parts when alive but cannot when dead. I think it is obvious, if there are such things as corpses, that they acquire new parts immediately after death through isolated cell activity, postmortem procedures, and during the later process of decay. My example of perverse morgue workers doubling the size and replacing all the matter of a corpse was intended to make readers suspicious of such compositional bonds for while they were allegedly an appropriate way for parts to be combined, they were limited in their extension. That is why I had the "matter added" by the morgue workers be "similar and combined in a way that it cohered with the rest of the corpse in the same way that the existing, already attached dead matter composing the bones and decaying tissue does"(52). For the sake of argument, I was assuming that there were relations

that bound the parts of the corpse through its changes. I wanted to raise doubts about any compositional principles that would allow that some Xs could compose a Y if related in such and such a manner R but that there was a limit to how much material could be so R related. I contrasted this with a living body that could replace all of its matter or double in size. I think my discussion of changing percentages (understandably) misled LaPorte to believe that my objection was just to differences in percentages of increases. But if that was my point it would leave me in the odd position of denying the existence of sick or elderly organisms which cannot assimilate and grow at the rates of the young and healthy. Instead, my aim was twofold: first to use the *necessary* inability of the corpse to acquire in the same manner the same type and amount of matter as the living body to instill in the reader a belief that *different* part/whole relations (i.e., compositional principles) and persistence conditions were governing the corpse; second, to make readers suspicious that the latter were not genuine compositional principles and persistence conditions given their apparently unprincipled limitations.

LaPorte's above quoted symmetry principle seems to be suggesting that those who believe in the existence of corpses should deny that they can get new parts and thus there would not be any troubling asymmetry. But most people think dead bodies produce new parts posthumously through bloat, decay and isolated cellular activity. Bloating involves the production of gases that were not parts of the body prior to death. Bacteria that may have been considered parts of the body before death, and surely then produced parts of the living body aiding in digestion, create new gases and parts of the deceased body. Putrefaction is caused not just by bacteria already in the body but by insects attracted to the gases they produce and these transform the body thus giving it new parts. Putrescine and cacaverine are both produced by the breakdown of amino acids in dead organisms and the two compounds are largely responsible for the foul odor of putrefying flesh. I assume that if the corpse smells it is in virtue of *its* changing chemistry as some new chemical compounds come to be parts of *it* and not due to some other compounds which are not parts of the corpse but constituents of something else that stinks. Something similar might be said about the adipocere (grave wax) which the corpse's fats sometimes produce in a process called saponification which slows putrefication.¹ And parts of the head and chest etc. removed in autopsies are then sewed back and widely considered to be

¹ That people talk of corpses undergoing bodily saponification, embalment, mummification, and even fossilization implies they might believe such processes involve the addition of body parts rather than the corpses remaining within newer and larger saponified, embalmed, mummified or (partially) fossilized entities.

restored to the body but not by being assimilated, i.e., caught up in life processes. Moreover, if blood or some other liquid or gas exited the corpse during a postmortem procedure but then flowed back into the body later in the procedure, they would generally be considered to be parts of the body gained after death but were not assimilated. So while the living body could only acquire parts through assimilation, the dead body can only acquire parts in a different manner.

There is also nail growth and hair growth shortly after death that are considered new parts of the corpse but they obviously not assimilated by the life processes into a living organism since there is no longer a *living* organism! Likewise, after the multicellular organism dies, some isolated cells that survive for a time cannibalize adjacent tissues in order to continue producing their cellular products. They thus produce what are widely recognized as new parts of the corpse but they are not assimilated into a living organism. Furthermore, for a short time after somatic death, cells in muscle tissues produce the lactic acid that causes rigor mortis. Blood clots are also new parts of the very fresh corpse. And if brain death is considered the correct criterion for the death of a human organism, then the corpse would acquire all sorts of new parts as some brain dead bodies fight infection, heal wounds, produce scar tissue, manufacture hormones that prevent diabetes insipidus and do much else. Therefore, LaPorte cannot appeal to a single symmetrical principle of part assimilation to avoid the part/whole puzzles and disjunctive persistence conditions that I found so counterintuitive.

LaPorte does not discuss differences between live and dead bodies in the maintenance and removal of parts. This may be understandable, given my emphasis in the section, though not in the paper as a whole, on acquiring new parts. But even there I did write of the different relationships that bind (retain) the dead and decaying parts of the dead than the living. An obvious difference is what makes a liquid part of the living body than what makes it part of the dead body. It may just belong to the dead body because it pools in some cavity. But it was part of the living body because it was caught up in life processes. And before a body died, a “dead leg” or dead skin that was not caught up in the life processes that integrate the living organism would not properly be considered parts of the organism any more than prosthetics or transplants undergoing rejection would. However, dead limbs and dead skin would surely be considered part of the corpse. It is quite odd that such objects are foreign bodies at one time but not another. So it is not just the assimilation but also those relations that maintain and “disown” parts that are different in corpses and live bodies.

Let us turn now to LaPorte's objection to my second asymmetry argument. I wrote what I did because I believe the continuation of life processes (or at least the capacity for such) is essential to the persistence of the organism. If this is denied by those who maintain that an organism can exist without being alive, then there must be something common to the organism before and after death to preserve identity. But I argued that there is no structural commonality unless friends of the dead body want to follow Becker and maintain that we human beings do not come into existence until the middle of our mother's pregnancy when the body's basic anatomical structures are present (53).

Not so, says LaPorte, all that is needed is to appeal to whatever structure was present at time of death. Thus an organism persists when its life continues and then as long as most of the structure it had at the last moment of its life remains intact. The structure could be different if death occurred to an embryo or an adult. But the principle is the same, hence no troubling asymmetry, rather a welcome symmetry between adult corpses and dead embryos.

LaPorte's solution is actually a position I rejected in an earlier section (49-50) so I naturally did not bring it up again as a possible solution the asymmetry problem. I had previously written that it is rather suspect to claim that the existence of an organism after death is to be determined by its possession of sufficient structure from an earlier stage of its existence. If the living body's identity is preserved by the corpse, then "living body" is a phase sortal, just as "neonate" and "adolescent" are. But we would not accept using the retention of the structure of the neonate to determine the survival of the adolescent (48-49), claiming all parts acquired later were really bodies foreign to the adolescent. Perhaps LaPorte ignores this argument because it is in a different section or he might think the difference is that corpses, unlike adolescents, do not obtain any new parts so the analogy did not hold. But as we saw in the response to his first objection, if bodies survive death then they surely acquire parts posthumously.

Assuming LaPorte and like-minded readers are not convinced by my earlier response to appealing to "sufficient structure," what else can be said for it? In the original article I suggested that we compare the corpse's alleged sufficient structure to that of a frozen cryptobiotic organisms which still had their structure intact and only needed heat to have life processes restored (55). Likewise, it makes sense to say sufficient structure remains in many nonfunctioning artifacts if all that is needed is the new battery or missing part to restore function. But there is nothing comparable with the deceased organism. Life functions cannot be restored

by adding something since the corpse does not have the requisite structures to be animated. Adding either heat or water or air or blood or an electric shock or a new brainstem or a heart/lung machine or some other mechanical substitute will no more restore function in a corpse than it would if added to a skeleton or the dust of a decomposed body. My contention is that once “sufficient structure” is separated from functioning, the concept becomes hopelessly inapplicable. There remains only some physical resemblance of the corpse to the living body and as I wrote in my original paper that trying to capture that rough similarity by appeals to “sufficient structure” amounts to “perceptual intuition mongering (54).”

An additional reason to doubt that the deceased body exists if sufficient structure is retained postmortem is that the structural parts in question would only be accepted by someone who believes in the mereological principle of unrestricted composition. Think of all the ways the organism can die by matter being removed. The resulting corpse might consist in just the upper half of the living organism, the bottom two-thirds, the right side, an S-shaped part of the torso, or the brain with some of the skull, face and neck attached to it.² Any of the just-mentioned structures that first constitute the corpse right after the organism’s death were never at any time the improper parts of the living organism because the organism’s life was extinguished by its matter being reduced to that of the corpse. Would readers want to say that such odd combinations were once genuine anatomical structural proper parts of living organisms? I doubt it. So LaPorte’s position depends upon there existing prior to death arbitrary undetached parts of an organism that most of us would not recognize in our ontology. And he would not want to say that any such odd structure came into existence at death because then it would not be a structure retained in the passing from life to death.

There is a related reason not to recognize such arbitrary undetached structures as existing prior to death. If such structures include sufficient neurology, they pose a problem of embedded thinkers. That is, if there are such structures that are bigger than the minimal size the living organism can be reduced to while remaining alive and capable of producing thought, it is hard to understand why such embedded entities were not thinking before death. However, it is very difficult to believe that there are many thinking things where organisms are and no reason to identify ourselves with any one of them. Thus it is better to deny any such “sufficient structures” exist before or after death.

² The example of the head assumes that the organism can survive paired down to the size of the brain.

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References

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