SOME REMARKS ON 'PHYSICALISM AND IMMORTALITY'—REPLY TO DAVID MOUTON

In a recent article¹ David Mouton has argued that immortality is compatible with one sort of physicalism. I believe that he fails to establish this thesis and that, moreover, this article contains several misconceptions having to do with the topic of immortality.

Mouton defines physicalism as the idea that 'human nature is entirely physical',² and he begins by allowing that there is a sort of physicalism which is incompatible with immortality, namely, the kind 'embedded' in what he calls the 'classical' argument for immortality. This argument is, he tells us, as old as the Phaedo and is stated by Leibniz in this way: a simple substance can only begin by creation and end by divine destruction; it cannot perish naturally. Since whatever is complex can decay or decompose, this view denies that man is essentially a complex object. Mouton thinks that the idea of physical objects found here is the same idea presupposed by the recent psycho-physical identity theory. He goes on to caution us against the notion that simplicity alone assures immortality, for according to the argument which he is considering, the soul must be created by God—this sort of simplicity requires creation.

There are several things wrong with this position. For one thing, if there is a 'classical' argument for immortality it isn’t the one set out by Mouton since Plato did not have the conception of creation out of nothing which was shared by later Christian thinkers such as Leibniz. Plato (and Aristotle, for that matter) thought more in terms of 'movers' acting on stuff that already existed. Furthermore, if simplicity were enough it would establish the immortality of the souls of animals since their souls aren’t composed of extended parts either. A 'classical' author like Aquinas thought that what had to be demonstrated was that the human soul had operations—such as thinking—in which the body did not share.³ Aquinas’ arguments have almost no force for us today since we all have some vague knowledge of the brains’ importance for intellectual activities, but surely he was correct in not relying on an argument from simplicity to accomplish his proof. Again, it should be noted that the stress on simplicity obscures the very real connection between Aquinas and Plato in the Phaedo: what both men do is approach

¹ 'Physicalism and Immortality', Religious Studies, March 1972, 45–53.
² Ibid., p. 45.
³ See Summa Theologica, 1a, 75, 2 and 3.
immortality through the *intellectual* nature of the human soul—through, that is, its knowledge of ideas (Ideas, Forms).

Mouton next claims that the idea of a physical object employed in the classical argument emphasises spatial complexity and that this fails to distinguish animate and inanimate bodies. He tells us that a better conception of living organisms is found in Norbert Wiener. The latter emphasises the dynamic character of organisms. 'It is the pattern maintained by . . . homeostasis, which is the touchstone of our personal identity. . . . We are not stuff that abides but patterns that perpetuate themselves.'¹ According to Mouton, Wiener goes on to say that if the 'pattern' is seen as the essential nature of man, then we can foresee that in the future persons might be transmitted from place to place just as the sound of a human voice can be transmitted by telephone. Mouton adds that 'at every moment in this process the pattern would be en-mattered in one way or another, either on IBM cards, an electrical signal, or whatever'.² On this view of human nature, 'each living person is a completely physical instantiation of a particular form or pattern'.³ We are told that 'man so conceived could survive death and be immortal'.⁴

Once again there seems to be historical distortion here, for even if we grant that Plato's view of living organisms is too static, Aristotle's view seems dynamic enough. Indeed much of what Mouton quotes of Wiener sounds quite Aristotelian. And again a 'classical' author such as Aquinas had an Aristotelian conception of organisms and so it is false to say that the classical argument employs a view of living bodies which fails to distinguish them from inanimate objects.

But a more fundamental problem with Mouton's position is this: it doesn't seem to have anything to do with immortality. Suppose that someone died, that his 'pattern' was 'en-mattered' on an IBM card, and that at some later time this 'pattern' was reinstated in the form of a person. Even if we were to agree that this person was the same person as the one who died, what does this show about immortality? Nothing—nothing, that is, about the sort of immortality that Plato, say, had in mind. At the most what Mouton has shown is that this physicalism is compatible with a kind of reincarnation. In fact, it seems *prima facie* clear that such physicalism is incompatible with immortality since if a living organism dies and only its pattern remains, then that organism doesn't exist at all—only its pattern exists.

Mouton seems to sense that something is wrong here for he goes on to suggest an extension of Wiener's theory such that the body is 'assigned no crucial role'. He imagines a 'transformation from present form to a new form with no return and where all that is common is consciousness or its

equivalent in the new world’. But this move contradicts everything Mouton was trying to do up to this point. His main endeavour thus far had been to try to propose a more adequate view of living bodies, a view which accounts for the difference between inanimate and animate bodies. But he now eliminates any theory of living bodies, for it is a very strange theory of bodies where the body can be ‘assigned no crucial role’ and where the body has been ‘transformed’ out of existence and only consciousness (or its ‘equivalent’) remains. If this new proposal is to retain even a hint of a connection with the previous discussion, the most one could say would be that the ‘pattern’ of consciousness remained after the consciousness ceased to exist; but once again, only the pattern of consciousness would exist and not consciousness itself.

Mouton is aware that disembodied existence has been objected to on the grounds that personal identity cannot be preserved, but his reply is insufficient. He says that the necessity of the body is a ‘pedestrian’ objection since it is ‘reasonable to assume that transformations of persons from world to world would also involve the appropriate alterations of perceptual means for individuation’. If by ‘perceptual’ he means things like seeing and hearing, then he owes us an explanation of what this would amount to in a bodiless state. If he does not mean this, he has not specified what else the term might mean.

I would like to comment on two further claims which Mouton makes. At one point he says that the impossibility of immortality is incompatible with divine omnipotence. ‘All things are possible for the omnipotent, hence human immortality is too.’ But this is false. If God created creatures for whom Mouton’s physicalism is true, then since immortality is impossible for them (if not for their ‘patterns’), God cannot give them immortality. The traditional conception of God’s omnipotence is not that he can do just anything, but that he can do anything that is possible. Aquinas tells us that this doesn’t go against the angel’s saying that no word is impossible with God, for ‘that which implies a contradiction can’t be a “word” since no intellect can conceive it’.

Mouton concludes with the following objection to immortality. Memory is required for personal identity; eternity is of infinite duration; but memory is a finite capacity; therefore persons cannot exist eternally. Mouton says ‘it is a fact about the human mind’ that memory is finite. But what fact does he have in mind? Perhaps the fact that we don’t remember everything we’ve done and everything that’s happened to us. If so, this fact is compatible with the idea of infinite duration. It would merely mean that memory might cover an infinite period of time but that it would not retain everything that happened over this period. Furthermore, Mouton’s objection has the

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1 Mouton, op. cit., p. 51.
2 Ibid., p. 52.
3 Ibid., p. 53.
4 Summa Theologica, Ia, 25, 3.
5 Mouton, op. cit., p. 53.
curious result that if it were valid it would entail that men must die. Putting ‘survival of death’ aside, men simply couldn’t live on forever since they would have to forget who they were and thereby cease to be who they were, on Mouton’s own reasoning! He offers the example of someone who couldn’t remember anything that happened one million years ago and he asks how this person could be the same person as the one who lived a million years ago. But there is no trouble here. The man might be imagined to have a birth certificate indicating his age and if he could remember the last, shall we say, 800,000 or so years my guess is that we would be quite tolerant of his claim to be the person who lived a million years ago. What is more likely in point of fact is that he would remember quite well the first forty years, say, while the sixth or seventh hundred-thousand-year period might be a trifle hazy. At any rate, as Mouton himself says, finitude of memory is a fact, and this of itself does not seem to suggest any conceptual difficulty with human immortality.