1 The Importance of Embodiment

1.1 Overview

Part of what it means to be human is to have a body, to *be* embodied. We live as embodied beings. As theologian Marjorie Suchocki writes, we humans "are *we*: social beings, living in interaction with others like us. We are embodied creatures, with a distinctive human anatomy that endows us with certain restraints. We require food, air, water, and a certain degree of temperature in order to live. We are mortal in that we die" (Suchocki 1994, 49). Our lives are complex webs of embodied experiences, actions, and habits. As we'll see in the coming pages, our relationship with our embodiment is complicated. While our bodies are always present, they sometimes drop out of our active consideration and recede into the background. At other times, we take them seriously, but tend to do so under various kinds of idealization. Both of these tendencies are understandable. Yet these tendencies can both be problematic, especially if we are not aware of exactly what we're doing when we engage in them. Furthermore, humans are social creatures and members of moral communities. The fact that humans are embodied in the ways we are places certain normative demands on us that we'll explore later. But let's begin with the fact that we often take facets of our embodiment for granted.

Consider the fact that often that our embodiment recedes into the background. We know that we need to eat, sleep, and bathe. But it's easy for us to live our lives without thinking explicitly about our bodies, even though much of what we experience, think about, and know comes through our bodies. For instance, we experience and know about our environment through our senses. I can hear the ascending and descending scale of the violin in Arvo Pärt's *Spiegal im Spiegal* as I type in my office. We know about our bodies through interoception and proprioception. I know that my left foot is asleep, having sat at my desk typing with my legs crossed too long. Even when we notice our bodies, our knowledge of them is limited. Our hip flexor might scream for our attention upon leaving the gym, even though we didn't notice whatever we did that caused it to hurt. We might not know that our tibia is developing osteomyelitis until we finally experience extreme bone pain. Much of our body is hidden from our own experience without the aid of medical testing. Are you aware of the internal positioning or health of your gall bladder at present?

Much of our life is lived in what philosopher Drew Leder calls "the corporeal absence" (Leder 1990, 1). We often don't notice our bodies, even while we use them. We don't notice the feel of socks on our feet until something draws it to our conscious attention (Ratliffe 2008). Until this sentence, you might not have been aware of the pressure on your fingers from holding this Element or

your Kindle. You likely weren't thinking about the rhythm of your breathing, the rise and fall of your chest. Our bodies fall away from our conscious experience, much as we don't pay explicit attention to the shape of the individual letters in the words on the page when reading. There are some tasks that we can only do, or do best, when our bodies recede from our conscious awareness in this way. Thinking about the contraction of individual muscles, such as exactly how high we need to raise our leg by flexing the iliopsoas muscle, gets in the way of walking up the stairs rather than facilitates the process. We play the violin best when the need to pay attention to exact finger positioning on the fingerboard, as when we first learned, and the flexing of our wrist and arm moving the bow fades from our focus. We can lose ourselves in the music rather than specifics of our bodies.

Approaching the lack of explicit attention to the body from another direction, philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre writes that much philosophical reflection is "forgetful of the body" precisely by being overly focused on rationality, as if that is "somehow independent of our animality" (MacIntyre 1999, 5). This hyper-rationalistic focus is not only true of much philosophy but also within religion. Sometimes this is expressed in the tendency, found especially among some contemporary philosophers of religion, to have an overly cognitive approach that focuses on beliefs about religious doctrines rather than embodied religious practices. James K. A. Smith, for instance, thinks that much contemporary philosophy of religion is characterized by "a lingering rationalism which remains at least haunted (if not perhaps *governed*) by a Cartesian anthropology that tends to construe the human person as, in essence, a 'thinking thing'" (Smith 2021, 15). This tendency can encourage us to "leave the body behind," for instance, when thinking about the afterlife as if we became disembodied angels rather than continue to be the embodied humans that we are, albeit redeemed.

But we can't always leave our bodies behind in either of these two ways. We experience and interact with the world through our bodies, and at times they assert their presence. Our bodies are often more present to our consideration when there's a problem with them or as we age. They tire, get sick or injured, and fail to sustain our lives. At these moments, our bodies impinge on our attention and demand that we think about the vulnerability they bring. In her book *Illness: The Cry of the Flesh*, Havi Carel writes that "the healthy body is transparent, taken for granted. . . . It is only when something goes wrong with the body that we begin to notice it" (Carel 2019, 33). In such moments, our body's vulnerability becomes obvious. As sociologist and bioethicist Tom Shakespeare notes, "to be born [human] is to be vulnerable, to fall prey to

disease and pain and suffering, and ultimately to die" (Shakespeare 2014, 109). Our embodiment is a living reminder of our dependence and finitude.

At yet other times, we give a lot of consideration to our or others' bodies. But often when we do this, we idealize these bodies, rendering them less "messy" or "complex" than they really are. All too frequently, reflection on the body assumes, even if implicitly, an idealization that obscures important facts about what it means for humans to be "enfleshed." David Linton, for instance, writes about "the menstral masquerade," a set of social pressures for women to "hide the physical evidence of one's cycle" (Linton 2013, 58) despite the fact that most post-puberty, pre-menopausal females menstruate. Even though roughly half of the human population will menstruate at some point in their lives, there is considerable pressure not to engage with this fact. Menstruation is an example of what Clare Chambers calls "shametenance" – issues where we "maintain shame by actively shaming others, or simply by keeping things private, silent, invisible, unsayable" (Chambers 2022, 70). Menstruation isn't unique in this way. There is a wide range of facts about our messy bodies that we're taught from an early age that it's not appropriate to discuss in public. The social pressure to make our bodies look a certain way or to keep certain bodily processes hidden is significant.

Our idealizations of the body can be problematic. As discussed in greater detail later, the range of what our cultural ethos says human bodies *should* be like is much narrower than the range of what human bodies actually *are* like. Bodies deemed aesthetically pleasing are treated better than bodies that are not. Bodies that can accomplish various fairly arbitrary even if impressive feats are given large cultural esteem and economic influence. (Think of professional sports.) Disabled, misshapen, or scarred bodies are stigmatized, hidden from view, and treated as if they have less moral value. Social pressures encourage us to pretend that we're less dependent on others than we are.

These idealized understandings do not properly reflect the full range of human experience. But this is not only a problem for how we think about bodies. As a wide range of scholars of disability, race, and feminist thought have pointed out, the ways that culture singles out certain sorts of bodies as nonideal reinforce a range of problematic social norms. In the United States, black and brown bodies, for instance, are often assumed to be more dangerous, resulting in increased levels of police force, much of it lethal. How women's bodies look impacts how they're treated, from cat-calling to cultural preoccupation with thinness. Visibly disabled bodies tend to fair less well in job hunting even if their disability is unrelated to the nature of the job.

Taking the full range of human experience seriously requires that we think carefully about human embodiment, the fact that we have bodies that impact

our experiences in the world. We are born, live, and die as embodied beings. For those religious traditions that include belief in the resurrection, that too is embodied. This Element is an attempt to encourage serious thinking about a range of issues related to embodiment. More specifically, this Element explores a number of ways that reflection on bodies in their concrete particularities is important for philosophical and religious thought. It begins with a consideration of why certain forms of embodiment are often believed to be problematic. It then explores how a number of features of bodies, most notably facts about disabilities and other stigmatized forms of embodiment, can reveal important truths about human nature, embodiment, and dependence.

1.2 Us and Our Bodies

Thinking about fundamental human dependence in the context of philosophical and religious reflection on embodiment, especially in a text of this size, requires making a number of decisions. Comprehensiveness has to be sacrificed for brevity. For one, I shall engage exclusively with "Western" philosophical positions, though I draw on a wide range of methodological approaches. In terms of theological context, the treatment here will assume Christianity. In one sense, this is unfortunate since too much contemporary philosophy of religion has been restricted to philosophy of Christianity. (For a discussion of this problem, see Mizrahi 2019 and Simmons 2019.) Philosophy of religion should be diversified as a discipline in terms of which religions it engages. But there are two reasons for focusing attention on Christianity in this Element. First, it is the religious tradition that I know the best. (I didn't say it was a particularly *good* philosophical reason, but expertise does matter for careful engagement.) Second, Christian belief in the bodily resurrection of the dead and the incarnation offer unique doctrines from which to consider issues of embodiment. While some branches of Judaism also believe in the resurrection, "it is almost always left vague as to what sort of a body the resurrected will possess" (Wright 2008, 43). Christian philosophers and theologians have given the matter significant thought.

There are, of course, philosophical and religious traditions that don't think our bodies are fundamentally part of us. Instead, for these traditions, what we are most fundamentally is an immaterial mind or soul. While our mind or soul might happen to interact with a body, the body is not an essential part of who we are. For instance, in his dialogue the *Phaedo*, Plato recounts a conversation between his teacher Socrates and Simmias. Socrates indicates that despite being sentenced to death by Athens for corrupting the youth, he doesn't fear death since he hopes that it will bring him some future good. Death, says Socrates,

is nothing more than "the separation of the soul from the body" (*Phaedo*, 64c). When we die and our soul is no longer connected to a physical body, we will better be able to come to knowledge:

> The body keeps us busy in a thousand ways because of its need for nurture. Moreover, if certain diseases befall it, they impede our search for the truth. It [the body] fills us with wants, desires, fears, all sorts of illusions and much nonsense, so that, as it is said, in truth and in fact no thought of any kind ever comes to us from the body. . . . If we are ever able to have pure knowledge, we must escape from the body and observe things in themselves with the soul by itself. (*Phaedo*, 66b-2)

Because bodily death should not be feared but anticipated in this way, Socrates thinks of philosophy as "practice for dying and death" (*Phaedo*, 64a).

Similarly, seventeenth-century French philosopher Reneé Descartes is well-known for his own dualism. Like Socrates, Descartes thinks that the soul does not die when the body dies. The soul, he thinks, is immortal. For Descartes, the soul is "nothing but a thinking thing; that is, a mind, or intellect, or understanding, or reason" (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, med. 2). The soul is not physical, only a thinking thing, and it interacts with the body, which is physical but does no thinking. The mind and the body are "wholly diverse" (*Meditations on First Philosophy*, med. 6).

The focus on the "mind" or "soul" at the expense of the body in Western philosophy isn't limited to just these two paradigmatic instances. The dualistic tradition is much more robust than has been canvased here. Reflecting on the history of philosophy, Drew Leder finds that "within the Western philosophical tradition the body has often been regarded as a force of negativity, an obstacle to the soul's attempt to secure knowledge, virtue, or eternal life. . . . A certain devaluing of the body, either in the form of neglect, deprecation, or outright condemnation, has formed an ongoing theme in our intellectual history" (Leder 1990, 127). But not all bodies are the same, and the devaluation of the body in general is compatible with devaluating some kinds of bodies more than others. Joel Michael Reynolds notes the same phenomenon: "the life of the body for the 'Western canon' [in philosophy] is so often held to be worth less than that of the mind – and the lives of certain bodies and certain minds deemed worth less still" (Reynolds 2022, 1). Feminist philosophers, philosophers of disability, and philosophers of race have noted how the focus on the "mind" over the body has tended to devalue women, disabled people, and racial minorities. Feminist historians have shown that the justification of women's oppression often includes claims that women's bodily emotions overwhelm their "reason," associated with the mind. Treating women differently, it has been claimed, is

not only a way of keeping their bodies under control but also actually a way of caring for them given how their particularly embodiment works. Here we note that claims about particular kinds of embodiment often serve oppressive social systems (see Meynell 2009 and Glenn 2010 for discussions).

Historically, Christianity has not been immune from these dualistic ways of thinking. (This, in one sense, should be obvious since Descartes was himself Catholic.) The Early Church wrestled with gnosticism. A nebulous set of beliefs both within and without the Church, gnosticism understood the body as evil or a prison. Gnosticism strives for redemption understood as liberation from creation through the discovery of secret knowledge or *gnosis* that would free the divine spirit from the body and the material world at large. Largely due to the influence of Irenaeus and Tertullian, both Church fathers, Christian orthodoxy would come to reject gnosticism. While one can find forms of nongnostic dualism regarding human nature throughout Church history, Caroline Walker Bynum's work shows that the majority of the tradition has held that humans are a "psychosomatic unity" of body and soul (Bynum 1995).

Coupling the early credal assertion that God is "creator of heaven and earth" with the Scriptural declaration that upon creating "God saw that it was good," the Church affirmed the goodness of the physical world. Rejecting the goodness of the any part of the physical world, including the physical body, runs afoul of the Christian commitment to the fundamental goodness of all of creation.

Contemporary theologian N. T. Wright unpacks the implications of this in a number of his books. A central thrust of some of his work emphasizes that God's kingdom is not what we escape to when we die, as many contemporary Christians seem to assume. Thinking that the Christian life is primarily about escaping the physical world for a future spiritual realm, according to Wright, is rooting in "the residual Platonism that has infected whole swaths of Christian thinking and has misled people into supporting that Christians are meant to devalue the present world and our present bodies" (Wright 2008, 18). Our bodies are part of the "living sacrifice" that Christians are called to make to God as part of proper our worship (Romans 12:1). Taking physicality seriously rather than hoping to escape it one day gives us reason to value the body, and the rest of the physical world, now. More recently, his *History and Eschatology* argues that misunderstanding the history of the present physical world contributes to a misunderstanding of eschatology. Here Wright argues that the influence of Platonic dualism has led to "modern Western Christianity abandon[ing] the biblical hope of new creation and bodily resurrection" (Wright 2019, 33) in favor of a gnostic escapism. (We'll return to eschatological bodies in Section 2.)

Christian theology, as Wright understands it however, rejects the attempt to escape either the body or the present world. Instead, for Christianity