

heavenly bodies?

Alex Bunn asks 'what is the human body'?



BODY as machine



Medical schools teach students to treat the body as a self-regulating machine. Medics are merely body mechanics, hired to repair. It's a useful model when learning about hormones or kidneys, but less satisfying for describing whole people. Am I really just a computer made of meat? Am I really no more than a sum of my parts, 43kg oxygen, 16 kg carbon, 7kg hydrogen, 1.8kg nitrogen and a few trace elements? Is my body simply the vehicle for my selfish genes?

If my body is just an organic machine, what is its future? When any other machine malfunctions, it becomes scrap, like an obsolete mobile. No wonder our culture is hopeless about the future. Our bodies are like the larger mechanism of the universe in miniature, winding down until they reach maximum entropy, cold and dead.

VERSUS

BODY

as living soul



I want to contrast our culture's view of the body with a Christian approach. Contrary to popular opinion, the Bible is far more positive about the body than pagan thought. Firstly, the Bible does not reduce a person to an automaton. To separate body and soul would be extraordinary to the Hebrew authors, even miraculous.¹ We do not have bodies, rather, we are living bodies. The Hebrew word *nephesh* refers to a living unity, a soul fleshed out. Moreover, God is not the Grand Engineer winding up the mechanism and disappearing from the scene. Rather he is the potter, the tailor, or even the chef, an artist caught up with his physical creation:

*Remember that you moulded me like clay,
Will you now turn me to dust again?
Did you not pour me out like milk
and curdle me like cheese,
clothe me with skin and flesh
and knit me together with bones and sinews?*²

He is even described like a Great Physician performing the kiss of life:

*God formed Man out of dirt from the ground and blew into his nostrils
the breath of life. The Man came alive – a living soul!*³

But whilst animals are also *nephesh*, man is different, unique in bearing the image of God:

*So God created man in his own image,
in the image of God he created him;
male and female he created them.*⁴

The distinctiveness of man, the image, is not an extra circuit board that generates mind, or a design feature like opposable thumbs. Rather it is the family likeness to our creator, all that makes us human that images our creator.

And just as the Heavenly Father exists eternally in family relationship, we are not made as individual units off the assembly line, but as mutually interdependent family. Adam found this out when Eve was surgically removed from his thorax!

So when God looks at you, he does not see a disembodied soul, but an integrated whole.

BODY as meat



How else does Western culture describe the body? Just as a cow can be seen as steak on the hoof, so the human body can be seen as so much meat. Our bodies respond stubbornly to our requests, they are easily fatigued like a beast of burden. The body needs taming, sometimes by piercing and tattooing, which taken to extremes can dehumanise. We stab, mutilate and brand human flesh, like we would cattle.

And like all meat, our bodies are poised to putrefy, the moment the heart stops. Bertrand Russell lamented 'when I die, I rot'. The artist Mark Quinn captured this in a sculpture of his head made with his own frozen blood. If left to thaw for just a moment, it would melt away into a gooey mess. Such is the fragility of every human body, yours and mine.

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BODY as tent



The authors of the Bible did not shrink from hard realities, the transience of man's life, which sometimes feels as insignificant as an animal's: *But man, despite his riches, does not endure; he is like the beasts that perish... Like sheep they are destined for the grave, and death will feed on them.*⁵

All the same, we are not to despair. We are made for eternity, even if we are only en-route. Our destination is what defines us:

*He has made everything beautiful in its time.
He has also set eternity in the hearts of men.*⁶

Paul puts it this way:

*Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands. Meanwhile we groan, longing to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, because when we are clothed, we will not be found naked. For while we are in this tent, we groan and are burdened, because we do not wish to be unclothed but to be clothed with our heavenly dwelling, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life.*⁷

The longing for permanence, the sense of nakedness, of being out of place, the groaning of our ageing bodies, these are signposts to a far off place. We are homesick for a place we have never yet been, an eternal home on the farthest horizon.

BODY as playground



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BODY as temple



A less morbid modern attitude is to treat the body like an amusement park. It may not last for ever, but you may as well enjoy the ride. For instance, James Dean tells us to enjoy it whilst we can: 'live fast, die young, leave behind a beautiful body'. Our appetites regularly offer us a menu of thrills. And no-one has a right to tell me what to do with my play centre, it's all mine. But we fear the consequences. A sedentary lifestyle and the joyrides of junk food and chemical fixes turn the amusement park into a junk yard. Hence our papers are full of advice for prolonging the joy ride, extending youth whatever the cost.

Our predecessors had a very different perspective. Their Bibles told them that their bodies were temples, honoured places. The creator of the universe might even make a personal visit:

Jesus replied, "If anyone loves me, he will obey my teaching. My Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him."⁸

Bodies are therefore unique entities, points at which heaven touches earth. We are not created for our own pleasure, but for his. It's an awesome privilege to host the divine presence:

Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own.⁹

Privilege brings responsibility. Imagine being given a top of the range sports car: an Aston Martin or Lotus Elan. Or imagine you're given a Versace outfit with Prada accessories. You'd cherish your gift, and therefore take great care of it. It's an honour to be made human, as the ancient song lyrics go:

What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honour.¹⁰

An embodied human being is part of an extraordinary cosmic drama, even if we can't always perceive it. CS Lewis warns us not to treat human life flippantly:

It is a serious thing, to live in a society of possible gods and goddesses, to remember that the dullest and most uninteresting person you talk to may one day be a creature which, if you saw it now, you would be strongly tempted to worship, or else a horror and a corruption such as you now meet, if at all, only in a nightmare.¹¹

BODY as a prison of the soul



It is often said that religion denigrates the body. Yet it is pagan philosophy and pessimism that does it the greater disservice. Western civilisation was founded on Greek thought, which at times sadly diluted and corrupted the biblical understanding. Their philosophy often separated body and mind. Mind was seen as superior to the body as it can transcend the body into a heavenly realm of perfection. The body, with its appetites, sensations and flux, distracts us from the work of the soul: rational contemplation. Hence the body imprisons the soul, a vehicle for the real me trapped inside.

Harsh bodily treatment was used to punish the enemy of the soul, and death was seen as release for the soul from its cage, into a disembodied heaven. Some body-hating Christians still give this impression, as does talk of 'going to heaven', leaving behind redundant bodies on a redundant earth.

VERSUS

BODY as seed



The Bible, however, regards the present body as a glorious ruin in need of repair. Ruined because of the rebellion against God that led to degeneration, disease and death. But glorious because of its latent potential, the hope of eternal life. It's a flawed masterpiece that is not going to be discarded.

Paul used the picture of a seed. Just as a seed looks lifeless, and betrays little of its future glory from its outward appearance, so the present body is a weak and corrupted thing that awaits transformation:

*The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonour, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body.*¹²

The reason for Paul's and the early Christians' confidence is that they witnessed the first resurrection of this kind:

*On the evening of that first day of the week, when the disciples were together, with the doors locked for fear of the Jews, Jesus came and stood among them and said, "Peace be with you!" After he said this, he showed them his hands and side. The disciples were overjoyed when they saw the Lord.*¹³

The disciples were not expecting Jesus to return. But their surprise was two-fold. Firstly, men don't normally walk through walls:

*They were startled and frightened, thinking they saw a ghost.*¹⁴ But it certainly was 'the old Jesus' whom they recognised, and he carried the

scars from his crucifixion. And secondly, he digested food, like any physical body must:

Touch me and see; a ghost does not have flesh and bones, as you see I have." When he had said this, he showed them his hands and feet. And while they still did not believe it because of joy and amazement, he asked them, "Do you have anything here to eat?" They gave him a piece of broiled fish, and he took it and ate it in their presence.¹⁵

So the disciples witnessed the first appearance of resurrected humanity: fully human, but fully transformed: imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual. The question then is, which reality is most real? At first the disciples thought that Jesus belonged to a ghost world. Could it be that it is we who live in the ghost world? That compared with the resurrection body, solid walls are but thin air?

The God of the Bible is not done with the earth either: far from scrapping redundant bodies on a redundant earth, he will restore and renew that glorious ruin too. Heaven will be 'fleshed out' as heaven comes down to earth, to transform not just our bodies, but the entire physical creation, where there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain:

I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God... He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!"¹⁶

In conclusion, the Bible is frank about the shortcomings of the human body: earthbound, obstinate, decaying and distracting. But God's word to man offers hope: our bodies (tents) are signposts to an eternal destination. They can be honoured homes for the divine even now (temples). And they are glorious ruins that he wants to restore and renew: 'imperishable, glorious, powerful and spiritual' (seeds). Only in Christ is there such a hope for the human body.

Alex Bunn is CMF Acting Head of Student Ministries and a GP in London

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