Short Essay

The multipliable body

Karmen MacKendrick
Department of Philosophy, Le Moyne College, New York.

Abstract  In the modern understanding of the living body, bodily division is both fatal and distinctive; in the contemporary, the body is biologically and technologically multiple. Four premodern religious phenomena suggest yet another, much more fluid and multiple, conception of the living, spirited body. In relics, the divided body of the saint retains its miraculous vitality across its scattered locations, even restoring wholeness to other bodies. In transubstantiation, the host multiplies, according to the Eucharistic formula, ‘the body of Christ’ in all its specificity. Stigmata multiply the wounds of that body onto those of devout believers, yet retain the identity of these wounds as Christ’s. The development of wound imagery furthers this curious multiplying of the nonetheless carefully numbered wounds; they may appear arrayed behind the body of Christ or even heraldically arranged on their own. The very ontology of the body is different here.

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A few years ago, as part of a panel on ethics at a conference on Foucault and the body, I read a paper on corporeal obedience in which I made use of Foucault’s work on early monasticism. After the panel, a questioner began by remarking that the panelists were all assuming an eighteenth-century conception of singular, integrated bodies, of the human being as a subject constructed of coherent flesh. She then moved into an eager exposition of contemporary explosions of that view. We no longer view the body as an object neatly assembled from its parts, set off distinctly from other life forms; we are, after all, colonies of bacteria and dust mites as much as we are livers and kidneys; we are integrated with machinery and we bear transplanted bits. The old notion of the human
body as single, integral and neatly bounded is, she pointed out, outdated. Correspondingly, so were the views of the body presumed in the papers. The body, singular noun notwithstanding, is a multiplicity, a cohabitation of innumerable organisms, some of which come and go, reproduce, and are shed.

While granting much of her point and enjoying her excitement (and really, such radical rethinking about our own bodies is pretty exciting), I nonetheless pointed out gently that I was rather using a fifth-century conception of bodies; I had in mind particularly their dual role as signs of spirit and means of spiritual training. This the questioner shook off impatiently, as most of us do when enamored of relatively novel ideas: all that comes before tends to be gathered into a dismissible unity, viewed as one big mistake. Adding to this ease of dismissal, no doubt, was that ‘spirit’ business. We tend to turn off rapidly in the presence of such words; we are, after all, long since over the rigidly stable and intensely hierarchical metaphysics in which we think they play a part. Such was Nietzsche’s point (or at any rate one of his points) in proclaiming the death of God well over a century ago (Nietzsche, 1882, secs. 108, 125, 343).

But in fact the premodern sense of the spirited body is far stranger than this dismissive conception credits it with being; far less unified, orderly, singular or stable. If ‘human’ really does indicate the modern sense of precise, readily identified and wholly integrated individual identity in the flesh, then we are not newly becoming, but rather rebecoming, posthuman.

The insistence on bodily integrity is crucial for modern thinkers. Foundational modern philosopher Rene Descartes insists strongly on bodily wholeness as both a sign and a condition of life, and on bodily dis-assembly as the hallmark of material mortality (Descartes, 1649, articles 5, 6). The soul’s impartibility, its incapacity for disintegration, guarantees its immortality over against the mortality of the necessarily dis-assembling flesh (Descartes, 1641, Meditation 6).

This is a variant on the older and even more fundamental principle that, as the Neoplatonist Plotinus put it, ‘It is in virtue of unity that beings are beings,’ or, more succinctly still, ‘Not a one, a thing is not’ (Plotinus, 250 CE, 6.9.1). Not a one, a thing is not, and become multiple, a body does not live – it is no longer properly a person nor even a part of a present person. To be sure, these ideas, one about being alive and one about the very possibility of existing, are not the same, but both assume that integrity is essential to being a human (and not a corpse). I often use the notion of the divided body to illustrate the notion of unity as basic to identity: suppose, I tell my students, you come into the classroom one day and find that I have been hacked to bits and scattered throughout the room. I submit to them that they would not say, ‘Oh, look, there’s our professor over there, and there, and there’ but rather, ‘Oh, look, there’s her head in that corner, and an arm in that one, and I believe this is a leg!’ (And then, no doubt, ‘Do you think this means we all get As?’). Insofar as we can call the parts ‘hers’ (or ‘mine’) they still imply a unity, a gathering into an original body; the scatteredness, however, we do not call a body, much less
a person, but only unliving parts. The integrity and the singularity of the body make it not only what, but even who, it is. So, any thing is one thing, and any living body is undivided into component things. If inessential parts such as fingers have left it, they are simply no longer parts of its composition.

This still makes a kind of intuitive sense to most of us, at least until we remind ourselves that we no longer think of bodies that way. The contemporary view of the body holds it to be non-individual in being physically multiple, and this is pretty interesting; we can find cases in which the premodern body is non-individual in being in some sense metaphysically multiple, and this is stranger still. Though I will not have space here to go into great depth on this point, I would like to throw out for consideration a few instances of the phenomena that demonstrate this capacity for multiple embodiments, with a peculiar concomitant transformation of our sense of an original or proper human body. The generous reader (all others, I’m afraid, will be disappointed) might think of what follows as the very beginnings of real thoughts, a suggestion of some connections worth exploring.

The most intriguing of these phenomena are associated with that irksome ‘spirit’ – the bodies of saints and of Christ, the latter both Eucharistically and in its wandering wounds. These are fascinating instances of multilocation – of a thing, but not a one; of embodied life, but without somatic integrity. In each, an original is oddly altered but not wholly discarded nor disregarded; indeed, the bodies during the ordinary life of the saint and of Christ during the crucifixion are vital to the possibility of the deeply weird multiplicities that are not simply pieces or images.

Historically, the first among them is the late ancient and long-continuing case of saints’ relics. These are usually fragments, often tiny and widely dispersed fragments, of saints’ bodies in each of which the whole of the saintly ‘person,’ the vital force of that powerful soul, nonetheless, is said to persist. (There are rare instances of ‘whole’ body relics as well.) Scholars have emphasized integrity and unity in the phenomenon of saints’ cults and the veneration of relics. One often-attributed sign of sanctity is the absence of decomposition in all or part of a saint’s body, a sign that the corruptible, multipliable flesh partakes of the singular incorruptibility of soul. Peter Brown notes that the possession of a saint’s relics could even unify communities (Brown, 1981, 90–103). Caroline Walker Bynum has emphasized the historical connection linking wholeness to holiness, dismemberment to damnation (Bynum, 1992), and the wholeness of life and the force of sanctity held to persist in each sainted fragment are not unreasonably seen as a triumph of life and its integrity over death-as-separation, over the shattering or disintegration of the body. A relic might even miraculously contribute to the integrity of another body; early pilgrims sometimes left their own pieces, ‘an actual fragment of their own body, such as bits of bone or urinary stones, or more commonly, a wax or metal image of their ailing body part’ (Owens, 2005, 54–55) as a tribute to their own new and miraculous ‘wholeness’.
With the body widely scattered over various sites, the saint (unlike the professor) is indeed over there, and over there, and in that corner, and in that other country. The wholeness of the saint in every part is so profound that iconographically, saints who bear their wounded bits on display (such as the platters with Agatha’s breasts or Lucy’s eyes, or the skin draped over the arm of St Bartholomew) often show those same parts unscathed on the body that holds the platter or the pieces: wholeness means not reunification but multiplication.

Such imagery suggests an interesting disregard for a proper original from which one and only one of each piece may be taken. There may even be, at various locations, multiple existing versions of the same part of the same body. Occasionally, tests reveal these pieces to be rather newer than claimed, or even to have belonged to non-human animals. Rather than simply attribute excessive credulity to the venerating masses, though, we might ask, instead, whether it isn’t sometimes true that not a one, a thing – even a thing in some important sense a person – nevertheless is; now these fragments are parts of the saint’s body. What fascinates about such bodies is not simply their fragmentation, but their multiplication, the ability of each bit to form, without losing its status as part, a nonetheless overwhelmingly ‘living’ whole – many wholes that are nonetheless the same whole, discernibles nonetheless sharing an identity, without even insisting upon ordinary sizes and sources and numbers of parts.

The second phenomenon of multilocation is part of the strange substantial transformation called transubstantiation. Though the term was formalized at the fourth Lateran council in 1215, the concept that the Eucharistic bread and wine are in some metaphysically real sense transformed into Christ’s flesh and blood evolves from the considerably older notion of a ‘real presence’ of Christ within the Eucharist. Exactly how much older is a point of some contention, with the usual problems of precise doctrinal formulation and heretical variants along the way. Its basis, at any rate, appears as early as the second century in the work of such figures as Ignatius of Antioch, who writes, ‘The Eucharist is the flesh of our Savior Jesus Christ’ (Ignatius, 107 CE, 6:2).

The theophagic implications here have unsurprisingly overshadowed the equally odd metaphysics of location. If every Eucharistic wafer is the body of Christ, then that body is necessarily in multiple locations, not merely within a single church but across many. In the case of relics, though there is a wholeness to every part, there is at least no claim that each part is itself a whole body. Here, the essence of the body, and not just the presence of the spirit, is itself at once unique (no wafer is anyone else’s body) and multiple (the body is not fragmented among the wafers such that each contains some particular and unique part). Thus the Eucharistic formula ‘this is my body’ becomes true wherever quoted in the sacramental context, even though the deictic nature of both ‘this’ and ‘my’ would seem to make its true quotation – as opposed to simply saying it of one’s own bodily self – impossible. Transubstantiation gives
us many bodies, but more strangely, many of this body, in many locations, undiminished by partition.

From these two phenomena, one of human and one of divine bodies, we move to a final example that takes in both, that of Christ’s wounds. This example itself multiplies, as the wounds appear both distinct from the body in imagery echoing that of saints (these emerge around the fourteenth century, and become popular and spectacular a century or so later), and on the bodies of some particularly devout Christians, beginning with Francis of Assisi in the thirteenth century.

We might assume that a body’s wounds would stay where they are, until they heal and are no more than scars at most. But these wounds appear imagistically as lined up, disproportionately large, behind the figure of the same Christ who (also) bears them, echoing the multiplicity of the iconic bodies of saints, or they appear by themselves in a heraldic shield formation with the wounded heart at the center and the wounds of the hands and feet arranged symmetrically around it. The side wound may appear in the heart, especially in the heraldic versions, or even as a wound itself opening, as it were, on the page, wholly out of corporeal context. The modern urge is to replace the wounds where they ‘belong,’ back on the body (properly re proportioned, of course), but by the time these images emerge, those wounds have a life of their own. As with relics, their decontextualization allows their multiplication.

The wounds seem to wander, not merely imagistically off the original body, but somatically onto others. Stigmata are wounds that mimic some number of the wounds of Christ’s passion, usually these same famous five. They are the subject of some controversy and unease, as their presence is so easily brought about by mundane deception, and yet the Catholic church has not wanted to disavow altogether the possibility that they express an unusually intense imitatio Christi – an imitation that intensifies to participation. The wounds are ostensibly Christ’s wherever they appear – this is the source and the force of all their meaning (Wilson, 1989, 11, citing Sherley-Price, 165). Although as Christ’s wounds these belong to Christ’s body, the bodies on which the wounds appear remain those of others, with those wounds on them and in them – and ‘them’ here is many. As signs of sanctity, the wounds may even be linked to saintly incorruptibility, with fresh blood flowing posthumously from them (Biot, 1962, 27).

The ontological fluidity of the wounds is even such that, like the Johanine Christ, they may shift between flesh and the word – or at any rate between body and text. The British Library possesses a sixteenth-century manuscript (MS Egerton 1821) in which text and flesh come together with particular vividness. It opens with large ‘blood’ droplets drawn as if flowing down black pages; after a few more standard pages of text and woodcuts, the pages themselves become blood red, with ‘approximately 540 wounds on the bloodiest page.’ After 10 pages of this, there appear two facing images, ‘a Man of Sorrows surrounded by twenty
small compartments with instruments of the passion’ and ‘a larger woodcut of
the five wounds of Christ with a heart at the centre over a cross,’ centered over
blood-red pages (British Library, Catalog of Illuminated Manuscripts).

In this extraordinary work there emerges yet another way in which the
wounds multiply and re-embody. They appear, that is, as images distinct from
their ‘proper’ place on the ‘whole’ body; they appear re-placed on stigmatic
devoted bodies; and they appear in an extraordinary combination of the two,
as images on pages soaked in the ‘blood’ they produce. This is multiplicity to
undeniable excess.

In this excess, as in that of saints’ relics, the Eucharistic host, and stigmata, is
something of the character of sacred flesh, I think, and the flesh conceived as
sacred – as the inseparable site of spirit – is flesh in its premodern multiplicity.
These examples are extremes and rarities, but that they are even possibilities
remains significant. This is flesh in excess of mere or reductive materialism,
but it is flesh for all that; the mad multiplicity of body parts and bodily wounds
does not suggest in the slightest a distance of spirit from corporeality. The
excessiveness of the sacred, its ‘transcendence’ or surpassing, is right there in its
extraordinary ontology. There is a marvelous unconcern with the authenticity
or even the anatomical propriety of an original body, and yet that original is
somehow spilled over into the vitality, the animation or ensouledness, of every
body in which these multiplying phenomena occur.

In this excess, it is tempting to assimilate the instances of premodern multiple
thing-ness to the postmodern absence of an original, but this would be too hasty.
The original is vital in these cases: that there was an embodied saint, an incarnate
and damaged deity, is crucial for whatever strange sense relics, transubstantiation,
wound cults and stigmata might make. Our own understanding of the relationship
of an original to copies is not the relationship we find here; the original is neither
absent nor simply represented, but re-present, in fullness, over and over again,
again and yet not the same. What is so unsettling to us in the newer contemplation
and understanding of our bodily selves as colonies and compositions is, in large
part, the connected questions of boundary and origin. We want to know where
we begin and end, where our limits are; we want to be sure that those shed skin
cells, those mites living in our eyelashes, don’t really count as us. That our bodily
selves exist in this ill-bounded flux unsettles our sense of identity. Yet this flux
hardly compares to the exuberant excesses of premodern flesh. Only in the narrow
span of modernity were we ever neatly settled. We are only returning again to the
excess of our humanity.

About the Author

Karmen MacKendrick is Professor of Philosophy at Le Moyne College in
Syracuse, New York. Her work centers on a cluster of recurrent themes: words
(and silence), times (and eternity), desires (and pleasures), and always bodies. The work resulting from this set of obsessions includes counterpleasures (SUNY, 1999); Immemorial Silence (SUNY, 2001); Word Made Skin: Figuring Language at the Surface of Flesh (Fordham, 2004); and Fragmentation and Memory: Meditations of Christian Doctrine (Fordham, 2008). With Virginia Burrus and Mark Jordan, she is co-author of Seducing Augustine: Bodies, Desires, Confessions, forthcoming from Fordham (E-mail: Karmen.mackendrick@gmail.com).

References


