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Source: *The Hastings Center Report*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Feb., 1985), pp. 20-30
Published by: The Hastings Center
Stable URL: https://www.jstor.org/stable/3561914
Accessed: 04-02-2019 22:21 UTC

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Thinking About the Body

by LEON R. KASS

What is the relation between a human being and his body? Never a simple question, it is today even more puzzling, thanks, in part, to new surgical and technological developments that also give it great practical importance. On one side, we have a living body apparently devoid of all human activity in the permanently unconscious young woman who still manages to breathe spontaneously on her own for several years. On the other side, we have a human being alienated from his living body in the man who believes he is really a woman trapped inside a man's body and who undergoes surgery for "gender reassignment." In between, an increasing number of people walk around bearing other people's blood, corneas, kidneys, hearts, and livers; successful transplantation even of brain cells is currently proceeding in animals. To meet the shortage of organs for transplantation, some people have proposed that we allow the buying and selling of such human "spare parts," transferable both before and after death. Implantable and attachable mechanical organs add to our possible confusion, as do the more prevalent but less spectacular phenomena of wigs, tattoos, silicone injections, and various forms of body-building and remodeling.

If practice turns to theory for clarification and assistance, it finds there nearly equal disorder. Philosophers should certainly not be faulted for failure to "solve" the mind-body "problem"—though they are perhaps to be blamed for how it is defined and for presenting it as a "problem" to be "solved." But certain dominant fashions of thought do not even face up to the difficulty. On one side are the corporealists, for whom there *is* nothing but body and who aspire to explain all activities of life, including thought and feeling, in terms of the motions of inorganic particles. On the other side, say especially in ethics, are the theorists of personhood, consciousness, and autonomy, who treat the essential human being as pure will and reason, as if bodily life counted for nothing, or did not even exist. The former seeks to capture man for dumb and mindless nature; the latter treats man in isolation, even from his own nature. At the bottom of the trouble, I suspect, is the hegemony of modern natural science, to whose view of nature even the partisans of personhood and subjectivity adhere, given that their attempt to locate human dignity in consciousness and mind presupposes that the subconscious living body, not to speak of nature in general, is utterly without dignity or meaning of its own. These prejudices of theory do not accord well with our experience.

Several times during the past few years, I have led discussions with freshman medical students immediately after their first experience with the human cadaver in the gross anatomy laboratory. My purpose has been to explore with them their responses—their thoughts and feelings—to what is for most of them their first encounter with a dead body. As one might expect, responses varied considerably, from the student who had become physically ill to the matter-of-fact fellow who could not understand what the fuss was all about. Several students surprised themselves with their own reactions. Though all understood the necessity of anatomical dissection for their own proper training, many found the activity repulsive. "What if the relatives were to walk in? I feel as if I am abusing the family." "Did this guy knowingly consent to be dissected? Did he really know what we are going to do to him?" "I would never let this happen to my father—or to myself." Some commented on the youth and beauty, or on the decrepitude and ugliness, of their particular specimens; many expressed curiosity about the individual lives that once were led by these bodies. Someone expressed gratitude for the gift of the body and the invitation to study it, but for someone else, this reminder of missing personhood made working on the cadaver only more difficult. Many said they could not bear to look upon the face; I myself had seen that, in almost all cases, the face was the first part to be covered and wrapped. Some could not look at the genitalia; others could not touch the hands. Reservations were expressed about performing unavoidable "invasions of privacy," "objectification," and "reduction to nothing" through dissection. Almost everyone who spoke acknowledged expressly or tacitly the need, and his own desire, to respect the mortal remains of a human being, but those who were most troubled somehow intuited the impossibility of doing so. They understood and felt that they were engaged in something fundamentally disrespectful—albeit in a good cause.

Such responses have, of course, been noted by others; they are the subject of a careful sociopsychological study by

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Renee Fox.[1] But what has not been sufficiently observed, in my view, is the fact that all these responses—perfectly natural ones to a layman—are entirely inappropriate and unreasonable, unreasonable, that is, on the scientific view of the body that our medical students are taught and to which they adhere. Their science—*our* science—regards the living body in terms of nonliving matter in motion. Extended matter in necessary and purposeless motion, organized by necessity on an inherited plan and functioning as pure mechanism, the body in life is, on this scientific view, no object for shame, awe, or respect. And in death, it is a gradually decaying, inoperative, worthless heap of finally homogeneous stuff. What, as the true corporealist said, is all the fuss about?

Soon the class would be hard at work, digging away in dead earnest, and reaching uniform agreement on the names, locations, relations, and functions of each of the separate organs, tissues, nerves, and blood vessels. Soon no one would think of the cadaver as a whole, never mind in relation to a person. The powerful scientific way of analysis would in fact and in thought dissolve the whole, and with it those original "unscientific"—indeed natural—repugnances. And yet, those initial reactions and thoughts strike me as sound. For the body—even the dead body, the mortal remains of a singular human being—is more than our present science can say. And what of the living body? Does modern medicine, grounded in modern reductive and mechanistic science, have an adequate account of the living body—as an organic whole; as lively and self-moving; as a personal center of awareness, felt need, and self-concern; as a vehicle of individuated self-presentation and communication? Is there a biology, an anthropology, that does justice to the being and meaning of the body and of bodily life—as we live it?

A second story cuts in a different direction. Roughly eleven years ago I went to the local hospital to visit an extraordinary man I had come to know. Though I knew him only in his waning years, he displayed even then the most amazing mind I had ever encountered; no offense to my readers, his was a mind whose power, learning, and understanding were virtually off the scale occupied by the rest of us. He had written a shelf of luminous books and had as many left in him, if only he could remain fit long enough to get them written down. I had attended some of his seminars. Flattered that a medical doctor would find his humanistic teaching interesting, he honored me with the opportunity for occasional private conversation—though this sometimes turned to medical problems, not surprisingly his own. He was weak, frail, sickly—and even in health had a body that promised nothing of the wonders of his mind. The first things he read in the newspapers were the obituaries: "To see if I died," he would explain. I had seen him well on the previous day, as his official physician pronounced him fit to travel for a lecture. He became ill en route and was brought back to hospital. Looking to cheer him up, I walked briskly to the hospital room where I had visited him during several previous hospitalizations. I asked the nurse who was just leaving his room how he was doing. "Don't you know," she replied, "Mr. __ expired an hour ago." I entered the room, thunderstruck. There he lay, peacefully, a frail figure in a large bed, half-smiling, as if in a pleasant dream. Dreaming, I would have thought had I not met the nurse. Moments later, I found myself on my knees at the foot of the bed, full of awe and horror. Over and over, I asked myself, "Where *is* he? Where did he go? Where is that mind, that learning and understanding, those unwritten books that no one will now write?"* There he lay, or seemed to lie, but lay not; there he was or seemed to be, but was not. The body, the still warm and undisfigured body, identical in looks to what I had seen the day before, mocked me with its unintentional dissembling and camouflage of extinction. Here, there was vastly *less* than meets the eye. The dead body may be more than what our science teaches, but it is also less than what it appears to us to be. The body may be more than stuff, but the man seems to be more than his body.

These two stories drive one in two contradictory directions: first, to suspect that a man is self-identical with his body; second, to suspect that the best part of a man is somehow not corporeal. The first invites us to return from our abstract scientific notions again to treat seriously ordinary appearances; the second requires us also to look beyond the appearances (though not in the way of modern science) to something utterly invisible and intangible. Neither of these conclusions or directions is comfortably at home in current thought. The first, by identifying man and body, might seem to agree with the scientist's or corporealist's view that man *is* nothing but "body," but in fact this body points not to "matter" but to notions of bodily wholeness, individuation, and active form—in short, to a very different idea of *body*. The second invites speculation about an incorporeal soul or mind, a notion still present in religious but long absent from philosophical or biological discourse.

Once such perplexities are raised, there is no alternative but to think about the body. In keeping with my search for a more natural science, I will pursue mainly the first line of inquiry in an effort to make manifest some plain truths

**Any* death raises acutely the question of the relation of the human being to his body; the death reported in this story is special only because of the magnitude of what has vanished without trace. Even in my medical days, well before I acquired philosophical interests in these matters, I found the disappearance of a human life from a human body to be a simply incomprehensible occurrence. For this reason, I always disliked the autopsy room, where confident pathologists gave anatomical or physiological explanations, adequate to their limited purpose, that only increased my bewilderment regarding the questions that most troubled me: "What *happened* to *my patient*? What was responsible for his extinction?" (For a sensitive treatment of this topic, see Richard Selzer, M.D., "An Absence of Windows," in his *Confessions of a Knife*, and "The Corpse," in his *Mortal Lessons: Notes on the Art of Surgery*.[2])

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about the body, which a proper biology and anthropology would not ignore. I do so without any hope—or even desire—of dispelling or denying the mystery of the body's nature and being. On the contrary, I seek to recover and reaffirm it.

There are, of course, obstacles to thinking about the body. First of all, the body—or, to avoid begging the question, most of it—is mute. True enough, each of us has experience of his or her own body, but that experience is entirely subrational (that is, inarticulate and speechless) and probably even largely unconscious. The materials for thought are available, but the handles are not ready made. In fact—a second obstacle—it seems that there may be no *naturally* or universally appropriate way to think about the body and no universally valid "plain truths" about the body, since different cultures vary widely in their assessments of the nature and worth of what we call "the body." Questions about the body are tied to questions about life, death, and soul; the whole cosmic picture is soon at issue, and about such matters, we are well aware, cultures differ. Some believe in the transmigration of souls, others believe there is no soul; some are panpsychists, others pancorporealists, still others dualists. In our tolerant age, we are reluctant to declare another culture's beliefs less worthy or true than our own. Indeed, we are generally quick to criticize as ethnocentric any of our own passionately held beliefs—except, of course, for cultural relativism itself, a belief, we generally forget, that is itself culture bound.

This is not a new difficulty. One of our oldest texts on the subject of the power and relativity of law and custom, in fact, deals with the treatment of the dead body. It is found in Book III of Herodotus's *Inquiries*:

> . . . If one were to offer men to choose out of all the customs in the world such as seemed to them the best, they would examine the whole number, and end by preferring their own; so convinced are they that their own usages far surpass those of all others. Unless, therefore, a man was mad, it is not likely that he would make sport of such matters. That people have this feeling about their laws may be seen by many proofs: among others, by the following. Darius, after he had got the kingdom, called into his presence certain Greeks who were at hand, and asked what he should pay them to eat the bodies of their fathers when they died. To which they answered, that there was no sum that would tempt them to do such a thing. He then sent for certain Indians, of the race called Callatians, men who eat their fathers, and asked them, while the Greeks stood by, and knew by the help of an interpreter all that was said, what he should give them to burn the bodies of their fathers at their decease. The Indians exclaimed aloud, and bade him forbear such language. Such is men's custom; and Pindar was right in my judgment, when he said "Law [or 'custom' or 'convention' or 'mores': *nomos*] is king over all."[3]

Men's customs regarding dead bodies, like customs in general, are both powerful and powerfully different. But not all-powerful or altogether different. Those who attend carefully may learn from the story that custom may be king over almost all, but not over all. Against its own explicit relativistic conclusion, the story presents at least two universal and related facts. First, everybody—Greeks, Indians, even Persians—dies. Everybody, sooner or later, becomes a body. Second, everybody does *something* with the dead bodies of the deceased ancestors. Human beings everywhere recognize human mortality; human beings everywhere feel a sense of responsibility to the deceased, elicited by ties of kinship. These samenesses seem to me at least as significant as the differences in funeral practice. Beneath and beyond the different ways human beings think or feel or act, there do seem to be at least a few universal truths about the body and its human meaning. I take this prospect as my license to try to think—and not merely ventilate the prejudices of my culture—about *the* body—and not merely some body, say, bodies of twentieth-century Americans. As it turns out, the results of the inquiry will cast doubt on certain reigning American opinions and (implicitly) practices.

The Body in Speech and Experience

Let us begin with the word "body." In its original Old English usage, it meant "the physical or material frame of a man or any animal; the whole material organism (as in 'to keep body and soul together')," or, in another sense, the "main portion of the animal frame," that is, the trunk ("all head and very little body"). In both senses, body has a correlative term: in the first case, soul; in the second case, head (or limbs). It is thus doubtful whether body at first denominated the whole living organism, or whether the whole was regarded as the body and then some. What is clear is that body meant primarily *living* body; only later (in Middle English) was the same term, as short (or euphemistic) for "dead body," applied to the corpse.* By extension, it came later to be used to refer to the person or the individual being. Not until the sixteenth century was the term transferred from the material part of man to material things generally; the first known use of "body" to mean "matter" occurs in 1586 ("a bodie is a masse or lump, which as much as lieth in it, resisteth touching, and occupieth a place").

In its prime usage, body is always body *of*: body of *an* animal or human being. *The* body is an abstraction. *The* body is always *some*-body, somebody's body, some body in par-

*Similar changes occurred also with the Greek *soma* and the Latin *corpus*: both these languages used the same word to apply first to the living body and later to the corpse. Both are contrasted with soul (*psychē* and *anima*) and mind (*nous* and *animus* or *mens*). Even ancient corporealists, like Lucretius, preserve the distinction between body and soul or mind, notwithstanding that they claim that soul is in fact a very rarefied kind of body (matter). German, however, has a distinct word for the living human body, *leib*.

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ticular. To seek greater clarity about the being and status of the body, let us consider our own bodies, how we speak about them in ordinary speech, how we experience them.

Sometimes we say "he pinched my arm," sometimes "he pinched me." The former seems to imply that I am distinct from the bodily parts, which parts are *mine*—my equipment or tools; the latter identifies me and my body. One might say that the former expression gives a more objective or cognitive account—I localize the act of pinching as it can be outwardly seen—while the latter gives a more subjective or emotive account, in which the pain and affront caused by the act to my person are central, and identification of me and my arm makes sense. But our usages are not so consistent. (Consider, in this regard: "Sticks and stones will break *my* bones, but names will never hurt *me*.") True, our speech in self-reference reflects a certain self-division, in which we are linguistically both subject and object, the viewer and the viewed. Indeed, the fact of such self-consciousness is largely responsible for the difficulty in understanding our relation to our own bodies. Yet, there is no fixed or constant biopsychological referent for the grammatical subject "I." The "I" who speaks of "my body" is not the same "I" who speaks of "losing my mind." Sometimes "I" denotes my totality, sometimes only my conscious part; sometimes my whole soul or psyche, sometimes only the rational principle of my willing or thinking. Such confusion is, I suspect, not merely linguistic or superficial. Though we have, as it were, inside knowledge that we are somehow a "one," a whole, a psychophysical unity, though we sense ourselves immediately as both feeling and embodied beings, we are also in various moments and kinds of self-consciousness more or less aware that we are also and at the same time two (or more); indeed, as I now try to think about my body, I am aware that my thinking, though it is *my* thinking—*of* as well as *about* my body—is not related to my body in the same way as, say, my pain or hunger or cough or disease. True, *thinking* is unmistakably done by me in a body, but in a body set aside, at ease and unobtrusive. In fact, were I fully absorbed in my thinking—oblivious to my need to come before the reader—I would not even identify my thinking as *mine*. Thought entails self-forgetting, even self-overcoming, as the thinking one becomes one with the things thought.*

Here, a word or two more about the curious usage of the possessive pronoun to identify *my* body. The locution makes sense in several ways: Often we regard our bodies as tools (literally, organs) of our souls or wills. Our organism is organized: for whose use?—why, for our own. My rake is mine, so is my arm with which I rake. The "my-ness" of my body also acknowledges the privacy and unshareability of my body. Sometimes we assert possession against threats of unwelcome invasion, as in the song, "My Body's Nobody's Body But Mine," which reaches for metaphysics in order to teach children to resist potential molesters. My body may or may not be mine or God's, but as between you and me, it is clearly mine. And yet I wonder. What kind of *property* is my body? Is it mine or is it *me*? Can it be alienated, like my other property, like my car or even my dog? And on what basis do I claim property *rights* in my body? Have I labored to produce it? Less than did my mother, and yet it is not hers. Do I claim it on merit? Doubtful: I had it even before I could be said to be deserving. Do I hold it as a gift—whether or not there be a giver? How does one possess and use a gift? Is it mine to dispose of as I wish—especially if I do not know the answer to these questions? The bearing of this on organ donation is clear; so, too, on our loose talk about an absolute right to do whatever one pleases with or to one's body.

Experience of ourselves as embodied provides no greater clarity. We can only give confusing answers to the curious question of where in this whole corpus we think we truly live. Science tells us the brain, but we do not experience the brain, and no one would naturally give such an answer. Much of the time, I think, we feel ourselves concentrated just behind the eyes; when someone says "look at me," we look at his face—usually at the eyes, expecting there to encounter the person or at least his clearest self-manifestation.* But *where are we* when we are exhausted or suddenly terrified? When we hit the baseball or make love? When one looks at gymnasts or dancers, are not legs and trunk as important as face? How indeed can we know the dancer from the dance?

We are, as we live no less than as we speak, deeply unsure of who or what we are most of all. Happily, in most of what we do, we feel no need to decide this question. We go about our business, usually with immediacy and without apparent self-division. Moral philosophers may busy themselves elaborating a theory of personhood based on autonomy of will, devoid of all references to the body; Descartes can declare—not seriously, in my view— that he *is* only a thinking thing;** biologists and behavioristic psychologists may advance their global corporeal or deterministic expla-

*In this way, the thinker can "think himself" far outside of his body, here and now, to encompass even the cosmic whole and times long past. It is this openness and transcendent possibility of thought that once made philosophers doubt the self-identity of the human being and his body. In the Platonic dialogues, Socrates's arguments for the immortality of the soul are connected with soul understood as the principle of knowing, not with soul as the principle of life. And Aristotle argued that, although soul (*psychē*) was generally the form of the organic body, intellect (*nous*) could have no bodily organ or permanent form of its own; otherwise, it would not be possible for *nous* to be open to all things, and some things would be unthinkable. I return briefly to this matter later.

*Hence our natural repugnance when we find instead silver-mirrored reflecting sunglasses.

**This is an obviously fallacious inference from "I think, therefore I am"; for from "I *know* only that I am a thinking thing," it in no way follows that "I *am* only a thinking thing."

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nations, denying the causal independence or even the reality of feeling or thought or the existence of free will—we don't care: We both know and don't know who we are, and appear none the worse for our ignorance. The way we live gives the lie to all this theorizing, and implies that the truth is both much more mysterious and complicated than is dreamt of in our philosophizing, and, at the same time, largely irrelevant to getting along in life.

Largely, but not completely, irrelevant. Sometimes we must choose. One of the most unsettling—yet for the thoughtful man, also interesting—things about confronting cadavers, dead bodies, or the question of organ transplantation is that we are by practice *forced* to decide who or what we think we are, really, and most of all. How to treat dead bodies may seem to be a trivial moral question, compared with all the seemingly vital problems that confront the living. But, from a theoretical point of view, few are as illuminating of our self-conception and self-understanding. I return to this point at the end.

Looking Up to the Body

Our insider's view of our relation to our own bodies is certainly useful, especially in relation to fancy and abstract theories that purport to know better. In his essay, "Is God a Mathematician? The Meaning of Metabolism,"[4] Hans Jonas makes elegant use of this "immediate testimony of our bodies" decisively to refute the claims that organic life—even the lowly life of an amoeba—can be fully understood, without remainder, on the basis of the principles of mathematical physics, so successful in dealing with inorganic body. Still, though "inwardness" is a fact, its precise character is hard to describe and its relation to our bodies elusive. In search for something more easily grasped, we turn from our speech about our bodies and our experience of ourselves as embodied to look directly at the human body itself. Most of what I will talk about is evident on the surface—though I do not think therefore only superficial. Our science distrusts the surface and finds the clearest and most certain truths buried within. To be sure, *how* the body works can only be learned by mechanistic analysis. But what the body *is* and especially what it *means* can be grasped, if at all, only by looking on it whole, as we encounter it.

Perhaps the first thing that strikes us in looking at the body—any living body—is that it *is* a whole, a unity, a one. It has a boundary, a surface that clearly delimits it from everything that it is not. It is solid but shapely, corporeal but articulated, enmattered but most definitely formed. The forms are distinctive—each one, though individuated, is always one of a *kind*, with a distinctive shape, attitude, look, and way of moving. When the living body moves, it moves as a whole; if we are able to observe it growing, we see that it grows as a whole. It is capable, when injured, of making itself whole, through remarkable powers of self-healing, and it generates other wholes formed like itself. And, in the higher animals, the forms and patterns of the body acquire a plasticity useful for communicating to other wholes of the same species, expressing in look or in gesture something of the state of the life within.

In his study of *Animal Forms and Patterns*,[5] Adolf Portmann explores the meaning of bodily form and demonstrates its revelatory character. He observes, for example, that with ascent up the mammalian line comes a marked accentuation of two poles of the animal body, one the center of awareness and expression, the other the center of reproductive activity. At the head pole, the head is progressively demarcated from the rest of the body, and a marked and mobile face is eventually formed in the higher mammals, receiving and communicating meaningful looks; the genital pole is also progressively distinguished, by the descent of the testes, special patterns of hair or coloration, and other ornamentation. (We note in passing that the activities here centered provide the two major ways mammals transcend their particularity: in reproduction, and in communication and awareness.) These developments reach a certain peak in man—though the head and tail poles are no longer poles, due to the fact that man has acquired an upright posture, which places his head high above his groin. I turn next to the human body and consider the meaning of our peculiar way of standing-in-the-world, keeping this Portmannesque observation in mind. In a second reflection, I shall speak also about our sexuality.

Nearly all of what I have to say about the upright posture comes from an essay, "The Upright Posture,"[6] by the late German-American neurologist-psychologist, Erwin Straus, an essay one can hardly praise too highly and whose riches I barely begin to tap. Straus seeks to articulate a biologically oriented psychology that interprets human experience not as a train of percepts, thoughts, or volitions occurring in a sequestered mind or consciousness, but as a manifestation of man's position in the world, directed toward it, acting and suffering. He shows the close correspondence between human physique and certain basic traits of human experience and behavior—and ultimately connects our rationality with our bodily uprightness. "While all parts contribute to the upright posture, upright posture in turn permits the development of the forelimbs into human shoulders, arms, and hands and of the skull into the human skull and face."[7] I summarize but a few points about (1) standing, (2) the arms and hands, (3) eyes and mouth, and (4) the direction of our motion.

Though upright posture characterizes the human species, each of us must struggle to attain it. "Before reflection or self-reflection start, but as if they were a prelude to it, work makes its appearance within the realm of the elemental biological functions of man. In getting up, in reaching the upright posture, man must oppose the forces of gravity. It seems to be his nature to oppose nature in its impersonal, fundamental aspects with natural means."[8] Moreover, auto-

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matic regulation does not suffice; staying up takes continuous attention and activity. Awakeness is necessary for uprightness; uprightness is necessary for survival. Yet our standing in the world is always precarious; we are always in danger of falling. Our natural stance is, therefore, one of "resistance," or "withstanding," of becoming constant, stable.

This instituted and oppositional but precarious posture introduces an ambivalence into all human behavior. "Upright posture removes us from the ground, keeps us away from things, and holds us aloof from our fellow-men. All of these three distances can be experienced either as gain or as loss."[9] We enjoy the freedom of motion that comes with getting up, but we miss and often sink back to enjoy the voluptuous pleasures of reclining and relaxing. We miss the immediate commerce with things given to animals and crawling infants, but enjoy instead the pleasures of confronting a true and distant horizon, as interested seeing becomes detached beholding. As upright, we enjoy our dignity and bearing and the opportunity to encounter one another "face-to-face," yet this very rectitude makes us distant and aloof—verticals that never meet. To meet, we must bend or incline toward one another, or express our intentions to one another in some departure from strict verticality.

In upright posture, the upper extremities, no longer needed to support and carry the body, are free to acquire new tasks. Much has been made of the significance of the opposable thumb and the prehensile hand. But this is a small part of the story. The free swinging of the arms is crucial to the psychological experience of what Straus calls "action space," not the neutral homogeneous space of objective Cartesian science, but lived space, my space, a sphere of *my* action, which somehow both belongs to and gives rise to my sense of myself and to which I am related through body, limbs, and hands. In relation to action space, the hands develop into a true sense organ—a tool—of "gnostic touching," ranking with the eye and ear in powers of discrimination. The hand also functions, in cooperation with eye and ear and mind, to form new kinds of world-relations. Among its many new functions is pointing.

> In pointing, also, man's reach exceeds his grasp. Upright posture enables us to see things in their distance without any intention of incorporating them. In the totality of this panorama that unfolds in front of us, the pointing finger singles out one detail. The arm constitutes intervening space as a medium which separates and connects. The pointing arm, hand, and finger share with the intervening space the dynamic functions of separating and connecting. The pointing hand directs the sight of another one to whom I show something, for pointing is a social gesture. I do not point for myself; I indicate something to someone else. To distant things, within the visible horizon, we are related by common experience. As observers, we are directed, although through different perspectives, to one and the same thing, to one and the same world. Distance creates new forms of communication.[10]

Pointing points ultimately to both friendship and philosophy.

With upright posture come major changes in the head and face, and a reordering of the relation of the senses. Sight replaces smell as the dominant sense, and in so doing is itself transformed, finally coming into its own as the sense of forms and wholes:

> In every species, eye and ear respond to stimuli from remote objects, but the interest of animals is limited to the proximate. Their attention is caught by that which is within the confines of reaching or approaching. The relation of sight and bite distinguishes the human face from those of lower animals. Animal jaws, snoot, trunk, and beak—all of them organs acting in the direct contact of grasping and gripping—are placed in the "visor line" of the eyes. With upright posture, with the development of the arm, the mouth is no longer needed for catching and carrying or for attacking and defending. It sinks down from the "visor line" of the eyes, which now can be turned directly in a piercing, open look toward distant things and rest fully upon them, viewing them with the detached interest of wondering. Bite has become subordinated to sight.[11]

Whereas smell, like taste with which it is intimately connected, is a chemical sense indifferent to the forms of things, sight—especially in higher forms—brings awareness of wholes. Thus, when sight is liberated from subordination to the mouth, it is open to become interested in forms *as such*, apart from the utility of such perception for feeding and defense.

> Eyes that lead jaws and fangs to the prey are always charmed and spellbound by nearness. To eyes looking straight forward—to the gaze of upright posture—things reveal themselves in their own nature. Sight penetrates depth; sight becomes insight.[12]

Though man remains a nourishing being, his being-in-the-world is not oriented solely or even primarily as eater.

> Animals move in the direction of their digestive axis. Their bodies are expanded between mouth and anus as between an entrance and an exit, a beginning and an ending. The spatial orientation of the human body is different throughout. The mouth is still an inlet but no longer a beginning, the anus, an outlet but no longer the tail end. Man in upright posture, his feet on the ground and his head uplifted, does not move in the line of his digestive axis; he moves in the direction of his vision. He is surrounded by a world panorama, by a space divided into world regions joined together in the totality of the universe. Around him, the horizons retreat in an ever growing radius. Galaxy and diluvium, the infinite and the eternal, enter into the orbit of human interests.[13]

These prospects for wonder and thought are supported also by striking changes in the mouth itself. Animal jaws, previously equipped to grasp and crush, are extensively remodeled, as are the snout, teeth, tongue, and muscles of the face. The human mouth—still the organ of ingestion, taste, and mastication—has acquired the flexibility and subtle mobility to serve the expression of emotions and especially the articulation of speech. Where sight once served the mouth, now the mouth gives utterance to what mind

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through eyes has seen. The mouth not only homogenizes form to capture its matter; it helps now to preserve and communicate perceived and intelligible form through articulate speech. What enters the mouth nourishes the body; what departs the mouth nourishes the mind.

The dumb human body, rightly attended to, shows all the marks of, and creates all the conditions for, our rationality and our special way of being-in-the-world. Our bodies demonstrate, albeit silently, that we are more than just a complex version of our animal ancestors, and, conversely, that we are also more than an enlarged brain, a consciousness somehow grafted onto or trapped within a blind mechanism that knows only survival. The body-form *as a whole* impresses on us its inner powers of thought and action. Mind and hand, gait and gaze, breath* and tongue, foot and mouth—all are part of a single package, suffused with the presence of intelligence. We are *rational* (i.e., *thinking*) animals, down to and up from the very tips of our toes.** No wonder, then, that even a corpse still shows the marks of our humanity.

Looking Down on the Body

We can, it seems, be justly proud of our upright posture and the other bodily marks of the rational existence for which we are natured.*** But pride goeth before a fall. Our bodies are not only organized and self-organizing wholes, independent centers of awareness, thought and desire, and sources of purposive motions; we are not only self-maintaining and self-healing beings, individuated, well-defined, and discrete; not only upright, well-proportioned, and dignified in carriage; not only clever and dextrous, separate but in face-to-face communication with our fellows, through pointings, gestures, and articulate speech. Our bodies are also isolated, finally unshareable—yes, even in sexual union—and privatizing; vulnerable and weak; often mute and opaque; and frequently concealing rather than revealing of the soul within. Though highly touted as compliant tools, they all too often are an impediment and obstacle to our wills that refuse to do what we want them to—have you, too, perhaps, recently tried to slide into second base? And our bodies are sometimes ugly and misshapen, and very frequently ridiculous: in short, a positive embarrassment to anyone with pride. Such is the ancient discovery of our race when, its pride newly aroused, it first began to think about the body, which seems to have occurred when it first began to think at all. The body, after all, first comes to light as naked.

With the help of our tradition's most famous text on this subject, let us take a more sobering and less celebratory look at natural or original man—upright, and, as Milton said, "of far nobler shape, erect and tall, God-like erect, with native honor clad..." Though we know from his later development that he was even then a being potentially possessed of reason, and hence of choice, man was, to begin with, guided by nature, instinctively seeking the things needful for life, which, his needs being simple, nature adequately provided. A prescient and benevolent God, solicitous of the man's well-being, might have sought to preserve him in this condition and to keep him from trying to guide his life by his own lights, exercised on the things of his experience, from which he would form for himself autonomous—self-prescribed—knowledge of good and bad, which is to say, knowledge of how to live. This tempting but dangerous prospect of autonomy, of choice, of independence, of the aspiration to full self-command, lay always at the center of human life, for to reason is to choose and to choose for oneself (even to choose to obey) is not-to-obey, neither God nor instinct nor anything else.

When the voice of reason awoke, and simple obedience was questioned (and hence no longer possible), the desires of the man began to grow. Though he did not know what he meant exactly, he imagined that his eyes would be opened and he would be as a god—that is, self-sufficing, autonomous, independent, knowing, perhaps immortal, and free at last. Such did the serpent promise—the voice that asked the world's first question and so disturbed its peace of mind forever.

Yet the rise of man to choice and knowledge brought none of these divine attributes—indeed, quite the contrary. The serpent had said, "Your eyes shall be opened and ye shall be as God, knowing good and evil." But, as the biblical author points out, with irony, "the eyes of them both were opened and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed

*Human respiratory patterns undergo marked changes during speech, and without conscious effort or awareness. More air is inhaled, the time of inspiration is shortened and the time of expiration is prolonged, the number of breaths per minute decreases markedly, chest and abdominal muscular activity differs, and so on. We tolerate these modifications of breathing for almost unlimited lengths of time, without suffering respiratory distress. Special inherited anatomical and physiological adaptations in breathing enable us to talk for hours. They constitute a crucial part of the composite package that is "rational animal," the animal having *logos* or thoughtful speech. See Curtis A. Wilson, "*Homo Loquens* from a Biological Standpoint," *The St. John's Review*, Summer 1983. See also E.H. Lennenberg, *The Biological Foundations for Language*, New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967.

**I leave out of the present account the way in which the *gestalt* of our entire form shows forth what and who we are. I also neglect the various bodily marks of our individuality, from obvious things like face and gait and gesture to fingerprints, and, even on the cellular level, the unique cell-surface antigen patterns, which are responsible for such things as our unique blood type and our immunological rejection of alien material, including organ transplants. See Adolf Portmann, *op. cit.*

***A careless reader may think that I am here suggesting that man evolved (or was created) *for the purpose* of rationality, and that the entire argument about upright posture depends on such a teleological view. But these questions of human *origins* and their *causes* are beside the present point. The point is that we *are naturally* prepared, not just in mind but also in body—better, as a unified composite of both—for a life everywhere colored by thought. That such *is* our natural endowment may invite teleological speculations, but it neither requires nor presupposes them. It is an evident fact.

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fig-leaves together and made themselves girdles."[14] The first human knowledge relevant to life is knowledge of our nakedness and knowledge that nakedness is shameful and bad.

What is the meaning of nakedness? Why is the awareness of one's nakedness shameful? To be naked means, of course, to be defenseless, unguarded, exposed—a sign of our vulnerability before the elements and the beasts. But the text makes us attend, as did our ancient forebears, to our sexuality. In looking, as it were, for the first time upon our bodies as sexual beings, we discover how far we are from anything divine. As a sexual being, none of us is complete or whole, either within or without. We have need for and are dependent on a complementary other, even to realize our own bodily nature. We are halves, not wholes, and we do not command the missing complementary half. Moreover, we are not internally whole, but divided. We are possessed by an unruly or rebellious "autonomous" sexual nature within—one that does not heed our commands (any more than we heeded God's); we, too, face within an ungovernable and disobedient element, which embarrasses our claim to self-command. (The punishment fits the crime: The rebel is given rebellion.) We are compelled to submit to the mastering desire within and to the wiles of its objects without; and in surrender, we lay down our pretense of upright lordliness, as we lie down with necessity. On further reflection, we note that the genitalia are also a sign of our perishability, in that they provide for those who will replace us. Finally, all this noticing is itself problematic. For in turning our attention to our own insufficiency, dependence, perishability, and lack of self-command, we manifest a further difficulty, the difficulty of self-consciousness itself. For a doubleness is now present in the soul, through which we scrutinize ourselves, seeing ourselves as others see us, no longer assured of the spontaneous, immediate, unself-conscious participation in life—no longer enjoying what Rousseau longingly referred to as "the sentiment of existence," experienced with a whole heart and soul undivided against itself. Self-scrutiny, self-absorption, attention to ourselves seen by others, vanity, and that perhaps greatest evil which is self-loathing—all these possible ills of thinking are coincident with self-consciousness; and self-consciousness is coincident with learning of our nakedness—our incompleteness, insufficiency, dependence, mortality, and the lack of self-command. Reason's first and painful discovery was of its own poor carcass. Rational we may be, but abidingly animal.

What are we to think of this double-ness imprinted on our bodies and essential to our being: on the one hand, our uprightness, our dignity, our capacity though we are only a part, here and now, to stand up before and to the world, to contemplate the whole and to think the eternal; and, on the other hand, our being weighted down, self-divided, naked, needy, and alone? We have, as it were, been demonstrating a possible and proper answer. Necessity may be a mark of our lowliness, but recognizing and owning up to our relation to necessity is not itself lowly. On the contrary, it is a mark of our dignity. Indeed, since much of dignity consists in our thoughtful response to necessity, we must even be grateful for it, just as we are indebted to gravity for the dignity of our posture, which, though exercised against gravity, depends absolutely upon gravity's power to bind us down. The rise of man may be ambiguous, but it is nonetheless a rise.

The animals, too, are naked, but they know no shame. They, too, experience necessity, but they neither *know* it nor know it *as necessary*. Thinking about the body may sober the thinker, and dispel his delusions of autonomy, but it does not cripple him. For one thing, the discovery of nakedness, however humbling, is a genuine discovery; our eyes are indeed opened. The so-called fall of man is identical to his mental awakening. Moreover, the discovery of his insufficiency becomes his spur to rise. "And they sewed fig-leaves together and made themselves girdles." Man does not take his shame lying down. Aroused from dormant potentiality, human ingenuity and manual dexterity give birth to the arts, at first glance, to cover our shame, but in truth to elevate and humanize the otherwise degradingly necessary. For in awareness of our need, we are capable not only of succumbing to it, but of meeting it in a knowing and dignified way: The story about our nakedness addresses us not only as naked, but as lovers of stories. In fact, the capacity for shame means also the capacity for the beautiful and the aspiration to the noble. And, finally, in—and *only* in—the discovery of our own lack of divinity comes the first real openness to the divine. *Immediately* after making themselves girdles, reports the biblical author, "they heard the Lord God walking in the Garden," the first explicit mention that man attended to or even noticed the divine presence.

The significance of this stage of anthropological self-development has been marvelously summarized by Kant, in his "Conjectural Beginning of Human History," which is, in effect, largely a commentary on the Garden of Eden story:

> In the case of animals, sexual attraction is merely a matter of transient, mostly periodic impulse. But man soon discovered that for him this attraction can be prolonged and even increased by means of the imagination—a power which carries on its business, to be sure, the more moderately, but at once also the more constantly and uniformly, the more its object is removed from the senses. By means of the imagination, he discovered, the surfeit was avoided which goes with the satisfaction of mere animal desire. The fig leaf (3:7), then, was a far greater manifestation of reason than that shown in the earlier stage of development. For the one [i.e., desiring the forbidden fruit] shows merely a power to choose the extent to which to serve impulse; but the other—rendering an inclination more inward and constant by removing its object from the senses—already reflects consciousness of a certain degree of mastery of reason over impulse. *Refusal* was the feat which brought about the passage

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> from merely sensual to spiritual attractions, from merely animal desire gradually to love, and along with this from the feeling of the merely agreeable to a taste for beauty, at first only for beauty in man but at length for beauty in nature as well. In addition, there came a first hint at the development of man as a moral creature. This came from the sense of decency, which is an inclination to inspire others to respect by proper manners, i.e., by concealing all that which might arouse low esteem. Here, incidentally, lies the real basis of true sociability.
>
> This may be a small beginning. But if it gives a wholly new direction to thought, such a beginning is epoch-making. It is then more important than the whole immeasurable series of expansions of culture which subsequently spring from it.[15]

Crucial to the development of genuine sociability and culture is the perception of one's place in the line of generations. Those who aspire to autonomy and self-sufficiency are prone to forget—indeed eager to forget—that the world did not and does not begin with them. Civilization is altogether a monument to ancestors biological and cultural, to those who came before, in whose debt one always lives, like it or not. We can pay this debt, if at all, only by our transmission of life and teachings to those who come after. Mind, freely wandering, in speculation or fantasy, can forget time and relation, but a mind that thinks on the body will be less likely to do so. In the navel are one's forebears, in the genitalia our descendants. These reminders of perishability are also reminders of perpetuation; if we understand their meaning, we are even able to transform the necessary and shameful into the free and noble. For even in yielding to our sexual natures—I must add, only heterosexually—we implicitly say yes to our own mortality, making of our perishable bodies the instruments of ever-renewable human life and possibility. Embodiment is a curse only for those who believe they deserve to be gods.

Where do we now stand regarding the body? What has our thinking about the body thus far revealed? The body bears throughout the marks both of human dignity and human abjection. It points us beyond itself, even to the heavenly and divine, and permits us to see and think and scheme; but it remind us, too, of our debt and our duties to those who have gone before, that we are not our own source, neither in body nor in mind. Our dignity consists not in denying but in thoughtfully acknowledging and elevating the necessity of our embodiment, rightly regarding it as a gift to be cherished and respected. Through ceremonious treatment of mortal remains and through respectful attention to our living body and its inherent worth, we stand rightly when we stand reverently before the body, both living and dead.

But thinking about the body is revealing not only about body; on reflection, it sheds light also on thought and its puzzling relation to the being that thinks. Consider your present thoughtful activity. You are seated, solidly enough, and holding book in hand. Your eyes scan the visible symbols on the tangible pages. Yet without your conscious effort, your body has silenced awareness of thigh touching chair, hand grasping book, eye crossing page. You have, for the time being, suppressed or suspended all other concerns, somatic and psychic, concentrating your attention and energy to receive the ordered units of intelligibility, themselves incorporeal, which are in some mysterious way "linked to" or borne by these visible symbols on these tangible pages (or, in oral speech, by audible sounds), units of intelligibility once somehow "associated" with me, now "at work" on you. My thought is, at least in principle, present to you, even in my absence. One is forced to wonder: Can thought be corporeal?

The living body of the thinker has extension—length, breadth, width—and place; his thoughts have neither. He is here and now; they can be anywhere and of any time—in the best case timeless and enduring. Necessarily embodied, the thinking man is mortal, yet his thought—thought as such—may live on, especially as it is revivified in other and later minds. However much our minding depends on the proper organization and function of our bodily parts, we cannot but suspect that thought and mind are not corporeal. And, in any case, the thinker and his body are not simply of one mind. The body, even in upright posture, has its own subrational needs and aspirations—not to speak of pains and disorders—that get in the way of thinking: an empty stomach or a full bladder make thinking difficult; the aphrodisiac pleasure makes it impossible.* Can we equate the human being *as thinker* with his body, even with his living, breathing, and moving body? How exactly can organic body think—or feel or desire or wonder or know? Thinking about the body of thinkers returns us to that mystery of mysteries which is its own ground: the being of an embodied mind or a thoughtful body. This is not a problem to be solved, but a perplexity to be faced, I suspect, permanently. We can here do little more than acknowledge it.

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*For these reasons, among others, philosophers have sometimes railed against their bodies and wished instead for disembodiment, for existence as pure minds, undistracted and unencumbered. The philosopher, it was said long ago, lives as close to death as possible, turning his back on things all too human, aspiring to live in accordance with that small but most divine element within him, intellect. Such men, it seems, exaggerated, else they knew not for what they were asking. Pure minds could be neither ours nor us; it makes no sense to wish something for ourselves whose attainment depends absolutely on our own disappearance. Even if thoughts (or minds) are incorporeal, the possibility of *our* having them depends absolutely on our being embodied, on our being a concretion—in fact, *this* concretion—of mind (soul) and body. Eyes and ears, mouths and tongues, are the scouts and servants of thought; the visible cosmos provides to thought most of its nourishment; and some other bodies help it to feed and flourish. True enough, our body is sometimes a pain in the neck. True enough, our self-division often prevents us from self-fulfillment. Yet other bodies, harboring other minds, are a spur to thought (and other activities); the "doubleness" of friends helps heal the self-division of each. Shared thoughts and speeches, the highest activity of friends, draw us out of ourselves. In the best case, the one and the other, in truth the same mind but diversely incarnate, transcend particularity and are opened to the universal and the eternal. But here, too, embodiment aids in its own transcendence.

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Thinking about the body is both exhilarating and sobering for the thinker: exhilarating because it shows the possibility of a more integrated account of his own psychosomatic being—against the prejudices of corporealists, subjectivists, and dualists—by showing the way in which his body prepares him (or, shall I say, itself) for the active life of thought and communication; sobering because it teaches him his vulnerability, dependence, and connectedness, exploding his illusions of and pretensions to autonomy. Thinking about the body is also constraining and liberating for the thinker: constraining because it shows him the limits on the power of thought to free him from embodiment, setting limits on thought understood as a tool for mastery; liberating because it therefore frees him to wonder about the irreducibly mysterious union and concretion of mind and body that we both are and live.

Thinking about the body ought also to be useful for thinking about and evaluating practices that deal with the body, in life and in death, though one should not expect to derive rules of conduct from such philosophical reflection. Although a proper examination of our practices lies beyond the scope of the present inquiry, I close with some thoughts about the treatment of the dead body prompted by the foregoing discussions.

Looking Rightly on the Body: Funereal Practices Reconsidered

Let us return to the story about the Greeks and the Indians. The story on its surface establishes the fact that each people thinks its own customs and mores are best; moreover, people generally do not believe that their own customs are merely *customary*, but think them inherently—naturally—right or good or best. *Nomos*—law or custom or convention—(and not nature or God or reason) is powerful and authoritative (kingly, not tyrannical) over all: over all people who live under it; over all aspects of human life, including especially what they think is right. Yet we who have learned of this power of convention are to that extent liberated from its rule. Contained in the discovery of the conventionality of convention is the simultaneous discovery of nature, of that which is everywhere the same and independent of human agreement. We are free to look to nature, to seek the underlying and universal, which each culture then rules over differently. And we are even free to ask whether all customs and beliefs about human life—about body and soul—are equally true to nature or especially good for a flourishing human life. Law may be king over all; but as there may be better and worse, wiser and more foolish kings, so, too, with law. Indeed, a more careful reading of the story bears out our suspicion. It also suggests that different cultural attitudes and practices toward the dead body may be emblematic of fundamental differences in ways of life, some better, some worse.

The Greeks, men who, one infers, burn the bodies of their fathers, answer Darius's question, declaring themselves absolutely unwilling to adopt the practice of eating their dead. The Indians, men who eat their fathers, refuse to answer the question as put, instead exclaiming aloud to protest the very speech about burning the dead. The Indians, more pious, or if you prefer, more superstitious, conflate deed and speech; the undoable is also unthinkable, or at least unspeakable. Their customs completely dominate their thought. They will never attain to the insight that *nomos* is king over all, thereby discovering the difference between convention and nature; they will never discover a world beyond their confines, never think freely, which is to say, never really think. The Greeks, though closed in their practice, are open in thought. They stand by and calmly listen, through an interpreter, to the exchange with the Indians. The Greeks are pious, but mindfully so. They are sober and attached to their own, but they know the difference between the love of their own and the truth. The Greeks, far more than the Indians, behave as rational animals.

Is there any connection between this difference in behavior and the difference in funereal practice? One cannot be sure, because one cannot know what the people involved thought they were doing. Still, the following suggestion seems at least plausible. The Indians ingested the bodies of their ancestors, thus preserving literally their connection with their own past, perhaps even in the belief that their ancestors lived on inside them. Theirs was a death-defying and even death-denying act, inasmuch as they swallowed much of the evidence of its occurrence. The Indians of this story probably made no distinction between soul and body, in identifying their fathers with the corpses of their fathers. Soul and especially mind had no independent origins or being, or if they did, their worth was subordinate to bodily life.

The Greeks, in contrast, knew the difference between the father and his mortal remains. Not by silent ingestion and incorporation, but in memory, through acts of loving speech and symbolic deed, do they remain respectfully mindful of their ancestor. Though its identity and integrity were respected, the dead body was not allowed to pretend to be the man it no longer was. It was dispatched, cleanly and purely, through ceremonious firing,* in full view of those who mourned. Greek ancestral piety is compatible with the independence of mind.

Though little noted, our story features a third people: the Persians, in the person of their king, Darius. Darius is presented as the man who has seen through the mere conventionality of conventions. Indeed, he revels publicly in his discovery. He compels people to look upon ways that are

*In this regard, the Greeks may be said to have somewhat less regard for the body as mortal remains than those people—like the Jews—who condemn cremation, bury the body whole, and, in orthodoxy, oppose all operations on a corpse, including autopsy.

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not their own, to confront what must be seen from his detached and enlightened view as the simple arbitrariness of their own way. Having transcended the limits of law—especially those tied to ancestral piety—he makes sport at the expense of the pious. Strict rationality is the Persian way: "The most disgraceful thing in the world, they think, is to tell a lie."[16] We learn elsewhere in Herodotus that the Persians looked to nature as divine—but only to the aloof, remote, permanent, and regularly moving bodies of the heavens (sun, moon, and stars), beings so unrelated and indifferent to human affairs that they might for all practical purposes just as well be absent. (In practical terms the Persians were indistinguishable from atheists—and their practices show it.) Their funereal practice is what you might expect:

> There is another custom which is spoken of with reserve, and not openly, concerning their dead. It is said that the body of a male Persian is never buried, until it has been torn either by a dog or a bird of prey.[17]

The Persians also practice mutilations of their own living bodies, in the service of shaping themselves according to their will and taste.

The Greeks, it seems, are a mean between the superstitious Indians and the autonomous Persians, reverent rather than fanatical or impious, reasonable rather than either irrational or hyperrational. In honoring the bodies of their ancestors, they acknowledge their own gratitude for the unrepayable gift of embodied life. Yet they make their peace with mortality by facing up to it and, through such representatives as Pindar and Herodotus himself, seek the enduring through memories, poems, and inquiries into the naked truth of things.

* * *

We, on the other hand, with our dissection of cadavers, organ transplantation, cosmetic surgery, body shops, laboratory fertilization, surrogate wombs, gender-change surgery, "wanted" children, "rights over our bodies," sexual liberation, and other practices and beliefs that insist on our independence and autonomy, live more and more wholly for the here and now, subjugating everything we can to the exercise of our wills, with little respect for the nature and meaning of bodily life. We expend enormous energy and vast sums of money to preserve and prolong bodily life, but, ironically, in the process bodily life is stripped of its gravity and much of its dignity. Rational but without wonder, willful but without reverence, we are on our way to becoming Persians.

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HASTINGS CENTER SUMMER WORKSHOP AT OXFORD, ENGLAND

The Hastings Center and the Department for External Studies at the University of Oxford, England, plan to cosponsor a one-week workshop on ethical issues in health care, to be held at Oxford, **July 21-27, 1985**. Among those serving as faculty will be Daniel Callahan, Willard Gaylin, Carol Levine, and Arthur Caplan of the Center's staff, and John Durant and Michael Lockwood of Oxford. Mary Warnock, Raanan Gillon, R. M. Hare, and Jonathan Glover are tentatively scheduled to participate in the workshop. For further information, contact Arthur Caplan, Box O, The Hastings Center, 360 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York 10706.

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