

The Body and Being Human

Our bodies are central to everything we know and experience. And yet, most of us take our bodies for granted; we don't reflect on the ways in which our bodies provide the grounds for our consciousness, language, worldviews, relationships, and even spirituality. But things are changing rapidly for the human body, and we need to reflect on how these changes are affecting what it means to be human.

It is now possible to do more for, with, and to the human body than ever before. Developments in human reproduction, genetic engineering, organ transplantation, computer technology, and a host of bio-enhancement practices give us the potential to overcome many of the body's constraints and limitations. At the same time, these and related developments also contribute to a deep uncertainty about what constitutes the body, its boundaries, its potential, and its meaning.

It is no surprise, then, that these developments have generated a wide range of social and political controversies in their wake—not only in America but globally. At the heart of all of them are implicit, and conflicting, conceptions of the body.

Consider just two prominent views of the body by way of illustration.

One emphasizes how social relations and culture shape our understandings and experiences of the body. We hear of the “gendered body,” the “colonial body,” the “heterosexual body,” and so on—each an abstract description of how society and its institutions classify, shape, discipline, and rationalize the body. The actual materiality of the body and its biological constitution are left out.

Another focuses exclusively on the physicality of the body. In such “naturalistic” approaches as sociobiology and evolutionary psychology, the body is the biological bedrock from which the social order arises. The body is viewed as a relatively fixed natural phenomenon that defines individuals. Missing in this approach is an acknowledgement of both the ways in which the body is shaped by its cultural context and our experience of embodiment.

Neither of these approaches is adequate to understanding human embodiment and all of its complexity. Herein lies the problem. Critical questions are left unanswered. What is the relationship between the body and self-identity? Does embodiment have implications for our thinking about solidarity, human rights, and even justice? How do interventions into the body, such as human organ transplantation, create new and/or perpetuate old social inequalities? Where do we draw the line on what we should do to and with our bodies and the bodies of others? Do our bodies themselves pose limits to science, the market economy, technological advances, or the pursuit of our ideals?

At the end of the day, our thinking about the body is simply not keeping pace with the complex technological, economic, and social pressures imposed upon the body. This lag in our thinking, and the incoherence that follows, places us in a rather precarious situation. To forego thinking through the question of embodiment at the heart of these changes may render vulnerable our very humanity. This issue of *The Hedgehog Review* brings to the surface some of the underlying assumptions and understandings of the body that animate contemporary social, political, and bioethical controversies. In doing so, it explores how the pressures and changes unique to our historical moment challenge what it means to be human.

— T. H. R.