

The Body and Its Boundaries

12:47

A needle slips under the crook of my arm. “Girl, I don’t think your head can turn any farther,” the nurse laughs. “I just hate to look,” I smile, but she can’t see my face twisted toward the back of the room. I can see the needle-free arm out of the corner of my eye. To pass the time (which drags slowly), I remember when my uncle told me that when doctors videotape an open-heart surgery for medical study, the doctors prohibit the patient from viewing her own video. He said that when a patient sees her face next to her own open chest cavity, something awful registers in her mind.

I can hardly look at my own blood and a surgery patient might go crazy with a glance of her own open heart – but why? Perhaps it’s the whole fear of the unknown; you don’t know what your insides look like and you don’t want to find out for fear of what may creep underneath your skin, like disease or gore. However, I think that this fear shoots toward a more specific target than the vague unknown because it feels distinct, like a cringing panic. The surgery patient and I may fear the sight of our insides because it worries us how easily our skin breaks and our chest cavity opens. We question the safety of our bodies and even what constitutes our “insides” (as they become outside of what constitutes our “bodies”). Further, if you have no certainty that your body has distinct definitions, safely enclosed by your skin, what certainty do you have? If you have no certainty that your heart will keep beating today, can you be certain of anything?

12:48

“Two years,” the nurse tells me. “I’ve been doing this for two years – I can even do it with my eyes closed!” I laugh a bit, “Oh, please don’t.” I feel her hands lift from the needle, still pierced into my arm. How gross – a needle pricking my arm, with no nurse’s hands to remove it! I stiffen my neck muscles and my head twists a bit farther away. I think about how some people in hospitals have needles and tubes and hooks in their bodies all day. Some patients have hospital artifacts in their bodies forever. In fact, although by accident, the doctor who gave my mother a C-section at my birth left a small surgical sponge in her abdomen. She didn’t notice its presence until years later; by then, her body had grown tissue around it, as if it were her own organ. In this way, the sponge became a part of her body. As I feel the needle still piercing my arm, I wonder if the needle may be a part of my body, too. I wonder if everything surrounding my body may, in fact, be part of it.

How is my body distinct from everything around it? On a macro level, what I call my own body equates to what I can control, so does that mean that what I own is merely what I can control? In other words, what is separate from my body, like a desk or a nurse, I cannot control. At the same time, parts of my own body, like its digestive system, I cannot control. So, if control does not dictate my body, then how can I define it? Perhaps a definition lies in viewing my body and its environment as a compilation of small units – cells to molecules to atoms.

On a micro level, cells are cells and molecules and atoms are just themselves, no matter where they float in the universe. A carbon atom is the same in your fingertips as it

is halfway across the galaxy. Here on earth, tiny carbon atoms in pure form arrange in one of two ways: graphite and diamond. Only the arrangement of carbon atoms differs between one form and the other. Graphite, polished diamond, the air in your lungs at this moment – a microscope is the great equalizer of them all. In this case, the closer you study something, the more it looks like everything else. So, there really may not be a difference between my hands and everything around them. Although this may hold true, I hope that reality includes higher meaning than just the physical level, which on its own yields a terribly empty life.

I heard of a man who had a bad acid trip and looked at his hands for hours. He looked at his hands as if they were just a collection of molecules and fell into despair when he realized his hands might be molecules and nothing more.

At the same time, a purely physical view of the body may offer hope. On this micro level, cells and molecules and atoms have a uniform structure, regardless of their placement in a body or a planet (or anywhere else in the universe). The entire human race consists of the same type of matter. If we share connections on a physical level, then cultural differences (political, social, linguistic, etc.) dissolve. Distinctions blur when we understand that we are fundamentally the same.

12:49

“How do young children do with this?” I ask the nurse. “For the most part, pretty well,” she says. “In fact, just the other day, I had this one little boy who was on the chubby side but really cute. I explained how the whole procedure would go and he got excited – he said, ‘I bet I’m gonna lose a few pounds when you take all that blood out of

me!” We laugh; children can have such a precious, simple approach to new experiences like this. When I hear about a child’s sensibility, it reminds me to check my thoughts, so as not to get lost in hypothetical banter that may not even carry any real importance.

Do these ponderings about my body and its environment hold significance at all? There are two types of significance: abstract and practical. Abstract significance deals with a mental outlook – that is, the capacity to change thoughts and perspectives. Pondering the body and its boundaries can provide profound mental change and thoughts that have never before entered my mind. However, I doubt these thoughts will manifest into actions.

The capacity to change outward habits represents a practical type of significance. Here, it seems that pondering the body’s boundaries holds little importance. My high school philosophy teacher explained that philosophers question reality all the time – but if even the most skeptical philosopher sees a bus hurling towards him, he doesn’t think “This bus isn’t real,” but he jumps out of the way. His skepticism toward reality has no effect on how he approaches life, especially on a day-to-day basis. For better or worse, people tend to approach life based on practical common sense (or their idea of it). So, when I contemplate the body and its boundaries, my thoughts explore new views of reality, but lack in practical application.

12:50

The needle glides out from under my skin. The nurse confirms, “You’re all done!” I feel her smooth a bandage across my inner arm and the blood courses safely through my own body again. I think about how my blood will not always run through my body like this. When my blood finishes its course, the body will take its place among the

elements. At this point, my body and its environment will weave together with no distinction between them. My flesh will decompose to cells then molecules then atoms and drift all over, maybe even to a mother's womb, weaving together a new person. Soon, my blood will end its course, but my atoms run for eternity.