

## ***Eva and the Body/Body Problem***

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I am going to start today by taking a bit of a risk and do some storytelling that may be rather shocking for some of you, but I hope you will stick with me and not be too offended. Reflecting on these particular stories has helped me contextualize for myself as well as given me a way to introduce some of the ways I have found to think about the issues Peter Dickinson's *Eva* surfaces regarding the mind/body problem.

Both my mother and my grandmother were chimpanzees—no, just kidding. They were, in the case of my grandmother, and are, in the case of my mom, both breast cancer survivors. Both had radical mastectomies, and both got standard silicone breast form prostheses following their surgeries. One day, about twenty years ago, I walked into my grandmother's house and happened upon a strange sight—there, on the dining room table, was her prosthesis, and it had a band-aid on it. “What's this?” I asked. She said, “Oh, my boob sprang a leak.” “Yeah, okay, but you decided to fix it with a band-aid?” “Well, if your real one springs a leak you put a band-aid on it.” How odd, I thought, and yet how fitting, that my grandmother would have integrated this piece of artificial material into her skin ego—in other words, it was not something foreign or added on, but it was instead a part of her organic sense of self, so a band-aid, rather than something more practical like, say, duct tape, seemed the logical fix for a wound.

My mother, on the other hand, has a different relationship to her prosthesis. Some months after she had been fitted for her breast form, she went on vacation just a few hours from her home. She had a doctor's appointment scheduled for the middle of that week, so she decided she would drive home and back on the same day, and that since she would just be in the car and at the doctor's, she would not bother with her prosthesis, which she found hot and annoying. Unfortunately, the doctor had an emergency, and my mother had to spend the night at home. While there, she wanted to go to the store, and because she had not brought her breast form, she decided that the thing to do was to go next door and borrow my grandmother's, as if it were a sweater or a cup of sugar. Unlike my grandmother, my mother sees her prosthesis not as a part of her body but as something separate and alien—something that she puts on for the convenience and comfort of the others who will be looking at her, rather than something she requires for her own sense of an integrated body image.

These two anecdotes represent two very different ways of thinking about the relationship between our sense of ourselves and the terms of our actual embodiment, especially when the frontiers of the body undergo radical change while the mind remains the same. As early as Plato and St. Paul, philosophers have attempted to account for a body and a mind that do not seem to work in tandem with each other and, in fact, are often at odds. Modernist philosophy augmented the mind/body split as a problem with Descartes' infamous *cogito ergo sum* (I think; therefore, I am), making a firm break with phenomenal reality—a break that allows a transcendental position that actually distrusts the body as a source of data.

Phenomenologists like Merleau-Ponty have challenged that position, and feminist philosophers have taken these critics even further by situating the mind/body split as a hierarchy of gender. In *Philosophy and the Maternal Body*, for instance, Michelle Boulous Walker argues, among other things, that male philosophers over the centuries have been able to abject materiality from their thinking by abjecting the body as a site of contemplation, denying their debt to the maternal body as their source, and figuring the body as woman so that they can dismiss it from their more sterile cogitations. Recent developments in the study of consciousness and neuroscience, however, have taken us back to the body, starting with patients' experience of bodily change and asking, among other things, how those changes affect the mind and, thus, rethinking the relationship between brain and mind.

For most of us after puberty, the changes that our bodies undergo as we age, for instance, or put on or lose weight, prune up, go gray, etc. are gradual and predictable, allowing us to make the subtle accommodations and compensations we need for the new ways we might have to move, say, or think about how to prepare our face to meet the faces that we meet (nod to T. S. Eliot). Depending on how our sense of self is related to our bodily integrity, however, a chance glance in a mirror or at a photograph produces a keen sense of disorientation when who we have been imagining ourselves to be does not accord with what we see. Alternately, we may suffer a radical alteration in our embodiment through disease or accident that forces an abrupt confrontation between a fixed sense of ourselves and a new body with new affordances. This is the thought experiment, the "what if," that Peter Dickinson takes up in his brilliant and original book *Eva*.

For *Eva*, her sense of self as a human girl was transplanted, along with her brain, into the body of a chimpanzee named Kelly. As the book progresses, however, *Eva's* sense of herself as an embodied person changes, which leads to some interesting and profound questions: Can our consciousness remain the same if our body changes? If it cannot, what does that tell us about the nature and location of consciousness? How does Lacan's mirror stage identification play into these speculations, his notion that once we recognize and accept our images as a representation of ourselves, even if it does not accord with our sensory experience, that visual image will determine our sense of self, rather than our phenomenal experience of our bodies? *Eva* immediately has Kelly's affordances and her biological imperatives, but she soon starts to dream Kelly's dreams and to know what and how Kelly knows. What does this suggest about the ways bodies know, the way they remember?

My colleague Jim Meyer and I have talked about the way *Eva* has helped him understand his mother's Parkinson's disease, which speaks, I think, to the range of interpretive possibilities and life connections that brilliant young adult fiction has to offer the adult reader. When Jim teaches *Eva* as a classroom text, however, he assigns an essay on Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. Gardner defines intelligence as the capacity to process data, and he identifies multiple ways in which people do this: linguistic, musical, kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, visual/spatial, math/logic, and maybe naturalistic and spiritual/existential. When *Eva* can tell time by the feel of the sun, for instance, her capacity to process data has undergone a radical shift based on her new embodiment, but her human sense of time carries over. When she plays at climbing, both her visual and spatial intelligence and her kinesthetic intelligence are demonstrably different than when she was a human girl.

Most interesting, though, are the changes that she must make in her ability to process inter- and intrapersonal data. Clearly, she will not be choosing a mate based on human criteria, settling down, and rearing a nuclear family. Those expectations are revealed as being cultural through and through; some species, we are told, have a biological imperative of monogamy, but chimps and humans do not. Eva as a human, however, has expectations for a life-long partnership that are not biological at all, and to overcome them is experienced as physical revulsion for her, revealing how cultural beliefs are written on the body and how the body can unwrite them in a time of radical change, especially when it is a matter of survival and perpetuation of the species.

Interestingly, Eva's ethics alter as radically as her body does. Science fiction has long given us disembodied brains in vats à la Descartes, but if Dickinson's speculations about the relationship between minds and bodies hold truth, then Madeleine L'Engle's IT, for instance, is not only impossible but is also more metaphorically evil as a concept than even the evil it perpetuates in the book—a brain in a vat has no ethics because it has no body, and it is through the body, not the mind, that we act toward the other—loving, hating, sharing, mating, giving birth, nurturing. Eva has to learn to love with her body just as she learns to fight, play, and escape. “How do I love thee, let me count the ways” is a distinctly human fiction, an affair of the mind, as it were, because, as Eva clearly demonstrates, embodied love knows nothing of counting. As Eva becomes more fully attuned to her new body, her new intelligences and ethics eclipse her old ones, her culturally fashioned attachments giving way to ones that are more fully invested in the lived body in the world.

Clearly, *Eva* offers an apt metaphor for the changes one goes through in adolescence, as Orson Scott Card remarks: “replacement of a small smooth body with a large hairy one, the loss of parental affection and the discovery of parental weakness; leaving the known world and striking out into the wild.” Indeed, other books about brain transplants and radical body shifts perform similar work. Meg Cabot's most recent book, *Airhead*, for instance, covers remarkably similar ground, as an intelligent, bookish girl has her brain transplanted into the body of a supermodel. Like Eva, Emerson must learn to cope with a foreign body with different affordances; she suddenly likes to exercise, for instance, and finds herself with a wicked case of acid reflux that prevents her from enjoying all of her formerly favorite foods that thus will keep her model thin. Again, like Eva, Emerson is confronted with the fact that her body has become a salable commodity and, thus, is not her own in more ways than one.

While Cabot's book offers some insight into the values of contemporary celebrity culture, it settles for just being light storytelling; twenty years from now, *Airhead* will not be under discussion for a Phoenix award. Dickinson, on the other hand, gives us a work that is, to use I. A. Richard's phrase, “inexhaustible to meditation.” By fully imagining the implications of a radical change in one girl's embodiment, he has produced a work that is prescient with regard to our understanding of the importance of the body to consciousness, provocative with regard to our role as stewards of the environment, and compelling as we rethink our ethics in light of our embodiment.

## References

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