

*Sightings* 11/01/07

Giving the Body its Due

-- Kevin Boyd

Towards the end of this past summer, findings were reported from a series of laboratory tests conducted in both England and Switzerland, in which researchers effectively sought to disturb the sensory signals received by the brain. This caused study participants to "feel" or "experience" themselves from a perspective outside their own body. In lay terms, the study participants underwent what some would call a controlled out-of-body experience. These experiments and other recent findings in the field of neurobiology, while not directly theological in their scope or purpose, are raising some profoundly important questions about the body and the construction of the self that modern theology, as an interdisciplinary enterprise, must engage with a critical and thoughtful response.

In making this claim I am indebted to the work of scholars such as Paul Eakin, a literary critic whose recent writing focuses on autobiography. Eakin's 1999 book, *How Our Lives Become Stories: Making Selves*, is an interesting exploration of these same questions of self and self-construction raised in the recent experiments. What Eakin argues, supported by a host of neurobiological data, is that one should think of the self as "less an entity and more as a kind of awareness in process." Further, Eakin claims that such a formulation of "self" requires a radical shift in discourse away from the dominant Cartesian model, which understands the "I" of self-consciousness as completely separate from the body.

Eakin writes that one must take the body seriously, not as a separate container for the "I", but indeed as something that can alter the very manner in which the "I" understands itself. Drawing from the work of both feminist scholar Elizabeth Grosz and neurobiologist and Nobel-laureate Gerald Edelman, Eakin affirms the former's assertion that "all the effects of subjectivity, all the significant facets and complexities of subjects, can be as adequately explained using the subject's corporeality as a framework as it would be using consciousness or the unconscious."

To give a very brief example: Eakin notes that congenitally blind children are delayed in developing their sense of self. These children learn the pronouns "I" and "you" much later than sighted children. Again and again Eakin returns to the autobiographical accounts of disabled individuals and demonstrates how their physiology affects their construction of self.

In delving into these issues, in putting forward an understanding of human physiology as crucial to (rather than incidental to or separate from) the construction of self, Eakin's study and the out-of-body laboratory experiments intersect with the agenda of modern theology. As Eakin asks, "Are bodies something that we *have* or something that we *are*?" The development of robust theologies of the body, theologies predicated on the notion of humans as embodied beings and bodies as something we "are," is a thriving enterprise within theological circles these days. Such an endeavor inevitably touches upon issues of sexuality, of limitation, but also on what it means to proclaim religious truths as a finite and bounded being.

The disembodied position, that which views the body as something that we merely have, can too easily lead to theological positions that gloss over the tensions, attractions, and repulsions that come with lived human experience. The failure of such theological systems to take seriously the notion of embodiment leads not only to theological impoverishment, but to the dangerous potential for a variety of abuses. These include the potential to abuse one's own body, but also the potential to fail to honor the value and worth of the body of the other. Violence is empowered by systems of thought that refuse to acknowledge, with integrity, the rights of other bodies.

Additionally, the numerous instances of clergy sexual misconduct can be read in light of this deficiency, as can high rates of clergy obesity and substance abuse. A disembodied theology has nothing to say on these issues, so they are often ignored until they reach crisis status. Likewise, a disembodied theology is of little utility in thinking about human sexuality and sexual ethics. The intensity of intra-denominational conflict over sexuality implies that the Christian churches have too long been absent from meaningful participation in such conversations. I am encouraged by some recent work on the subject, and hope that

the dialogue continues to expand. As medical science continues to explore the wonder of the human body, we must ensure that our theological thinking keeps pace.

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