2 | An Orientation to Bodies

Introduction

This book tells several interwoven stories: stories about Jesus, about the incontinent spread of images of him, and about the lives that people build with and around those images. All of these are stories about bodies: about the body of the incarnate Jesus, about the imagined bodies that mediate our relation to him, and about our own bodies as gathered by, around, and into his.

Various features of bodily life have proved pivotal in my telling of these stories. I have found myself coming back again and again to the *recalcitrance* of bodies (the ways in which their resistances and affordances curve the lines of the stories that include them); to their *entanglement* with all that surrounds them (the ways in which the story of any body quickly becomes the story of the whole environment that surrounds and moves through it); and to their *inexhaustibility* (their endless discoverability and capacity to surprise us, which mean that we can never finish the telling of their stories). These themes will come in for sustained attention at various points in the book, but this brief preliminary account will help orient the argument as a whole.

Bodily Life

As bodies, we have shape and weight. We have position, momentum, and temperature; we have texture and odour. We make noise.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

We have an arrangement of parts, connections that flex in some directions better than others, surfaces with differing degrees of hardness. We belong in a world of physical objects that includes pebbles, plastic bags, and pianos.

As living bodies, however, we belong in that world in specific ways, caught up in – indeed, constituted by – astonishingly intricate flows and circulations, both within us and suturing us to our environment. We register only some of these: our blood pulsing within us; our breathing in and out; our eating, drinking, and excreting; our leaking, shedding, and flaking. We are sites, however, of much more complex arrivals, interactions, and departures.

In the midst of all that surrounds us, and entangled with it, we are always living some specific kind of life. One way or another, we carry on – perhaps working to make some place habitable, perhaps searching out some new space or way, perhaps plodding on or struggling to keep going, perhaps succumbing to what is thrown at us. We always and unavoidably do all this surrounded by and jumbled up with other bodies (living and non-living), involved in more ways than we can catalogue with some subset of the world's reality that we can touch, hear, and see, work with or take for granted, overlook or endure or evade.

Our lives depend upon the bodies around us. If we live at all, we live upon and with and from other bodies. We include multitudes of other organisms, and are sites for the arrival and departure of multitudes more; the metabolism that sustains any one human body is a vast choreography with a cast in the trillions.[1] We depend upon the bodies of others around us for blood and milk, for warmth and shelter, for whatever care we receive, and for all the forms of training that make us who we are. We are

[1] See John Dupré and Maureen A. O'Malley, 'Varieties of Living Things: Life at the Intersection of Lineage and Metabolism', in *Vitalism and the Scientific Image in Post-Enlightenment Life Science, 1800–2010*, ed. by Sebastian Normandin (Springer, 2013), pp. 311–44.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

ineradicably dependent upon other bodies, and flourish only with their assistance. That means, however, that to be a living body amongst other bodies is to be precarious. We can't go on without food, warmth, and sleep. We bruise; we suffer aches and itches; we gather wounds and scars. We age, break down, and fail. We discover that we have limited reserves of energy, patience, and attention, and imperfect means of renewing them. There are so many ways in which the internal processes that keep our bodies functioning can fail, and so many more in which our engagement with the bodies around us can damage us, or in which our attempts to build a life can be frustrated or turn out to be misconceived.

As living bodies, we carry around and are constituted by our histories, both the long histories of the inheritances from which we emerge, and the shorter histories of all that has happened to us. The environments in which we have been formed and the ways in which we have been acted upon are written into us, shaping the way in which we go on to respond to further environments and interactions. Trauma in particular gets inscribed deeply into the substance and circulations of the body, changing its possibilities of movement and interaction.[2] If we make or discover any kind of habitable life in the world, finding for a time some workable settlement with all that surrounds us, we will also always be finding a way to live with our histories.

We see or otherwise sense our own and other bodies from specific positions in the midst of things. Quite literally, we see or sense them from where we stand, sit, or lie, but in a wider sense we also see them in terms of our appetites and needs, our hopes and fears, the plans and projects involved in our living. We see the face that bodies (our own and others') turn toward us, both literally and metaphorically. We don't see from nowhere, or in a neutral light;

[2] For an entry point to the discussion of trauma, see Karen O'Donnell, 'Trauma Theology', *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, 6 April 2023, www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/TraumaTheology.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

we encounter and engage with things as they relate to our living, and so inevitably in ways coloured by our desires, our emotions and habits, our gut reactions. We may of course learn to adopt some kinds of abstract view, forms of accounting removed from our immediate needs and first-person perspectives, but these too will be specific kinds of engagement that have a particular place in our lives. We primarily encounter space, for instance, in relation to our bodies and our needs, encountering other bodies as in front of us or behind, to our right side or to our left, within or beyond our reach. We might learn forms of mapping that bracket all of that, and place bodies on a grid with an origin other than our own location and a scale independent of our arm span, but such mappings are only ever tools apt for certain lived purposes and not others, capturing only a little of what matters.

Our apprehension of our own bodies and of all the bodies that surround us is also ineradicably affective, and our affective responses are layered, from the skitter of instantaneous emotional reactions to deep, slow patterns of feeling that colour all we do. These are themselves bodily matters, facts about the circulations and the structures that constitute us. They can be as intransigent as anatomy – indeed, involving as they do the subtle interaction of multiple bodily systems, they can sometimes be harder to work with, less open to intervention and repair, than bones and organs.

In the light of all this, it should be clear that living as bodies amongst bodies is inherently a matter of negotiation. It involves our working with the capacities and limitations of our own bodies, and with the capacities and limitations of the bodies that surround us as they relate to our projects, needs, hopes, plans, and fears. We work with the *affordances* of things – the ways in which they lend themselves to some pattern of use or engagement – and their *resistances* – the ways in which they turn out to be awkward, intransigent, or threatening. And our life with all the bodies that surround us, and the bodies that we are, is always a negotiation because it is always a matter of balancing multiple demands, and of

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

making multiple compromises. I can spend time on *this* only if I leave less time for *that*; I can reach for *that* only by leaning away from *this*. I can attend to some things only by blocking out others; I have the energy for only some of the things I wish to do. We negotiate with the physical affordances and resistances of bodies – the way a joint can move, the distance an arm can reach – but also with affordances and resistances rooted in emotions, desires, memories, skills, and understanding. I cannot do everything I want, or please everyone I would like to please, or balance every demand that I face – and that is an unavoidable feature of bodily life.[3] And these negotiations take on a bewildering recursive complexity because so many of the bodies with which we must negotiate are themselves living: they have their own plans and expectations that are not the same as ours, and they are engaged in their own processes of negotiation with all that surrounds them, including us.

Bodily life is, unavoidably, a mess.

Imagined Bodies

Our bodily negotiations always involve our imaginations. Here 'imagined' does not stand in opposition to 'real'; it names, instead, the way in which we, as living and knowing bodies, engage with all the bodies that surround us, including our own.

To engage with a body requires having some sense – however limited and tentative it might be – of the forms of interaction that might be possible with that body. It therefore involves imagining this body in some specific way, seeing it *as* some kind of thing. Our imagination shapes the life that we can build with other bodies and our own.

[3] See David Newton, 'Living with Limits: Finitude, Competition, and the Economy in Recent Anglican Theology' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2024).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

We imagine our own bodies, and this is no simple matter. We possess 'a (sometimes conscious) system of perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions' that includes not just our perceptual experience of our bodies, but various layers of conceptual understanding and emotional attitude.[4] We have, for instance, a deep-rooted sense in relation to our bodies of what is ours and what is not – a sense that is entangled with but not reducible to the role that parts of our bodies can play in our action and sensation, and that may or may not coincide with the whole body that we appear to others to possess. This imagining shapes very deeply the path that we take through the world, just as does our imagining of all the bodies that surround us.

Our bodily negotiations – our negotiations of our path as bodies amongst all the bodies that surround us – are both engagements with the actual affordances or capacities of all those bodies and engagements with our imagining of them. That imagining is often not easily malleable. We may find that, whatever we do, we simply can't imagine moving our body in some way, or imagine some other body yielding to a certain kind of approach, and even if there is no basis for that in the physical capacities of these bodies we may experience that unimaginability as a tangible resistance, a force that frustrates and channels our action, and that cannot simply be thought away.

And then there is a history to our imagining, just as there is a history to our bodies and their capacities. In fact, there are multiple entangled histories, evolutionary, genetic, cultural, and personal, all shaping the bodily life that we are capable of living. Consider Iris Marion Young's discussion of 'throwing like a girl'.[5] She points to studies undertaken some decades back of stark differences between the posture and movement of boys and of girls when throwing things. Young examines and rejects the claim that, since they are apparent even in very young children, these differences must be

[4] Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Clarendon, 2005), p. 37.

[5] Iris Marion Young, *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays* (Oxford University Press, 2005).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

innate rather than acquired. She acknowledges that there might be (on average) real differences in physical strength involved, but argues that the difference in comportment rests far more directly upon the ways in which girls are trained to imagine their physical capacities, and more generally their position in the world. 'For many women as they move in sport,' she says by way of example, 'a space surrounds us in imagination that we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space.'[6] Such patterns of imagination, which differ from culture to culture, often shape how women move, and how they move then shapes their bodies as they develop. There is a story to be told about how any given girl is inducted into these patterns of imagination; there is a story to be told about how the cultures that sustain these patterns emerged and how they retain their grip; there is a story to be told about the evolution of the bodily differences around which these patterns of imagination have been spun; and there is a story to be told about the routes toward emancipation that might be walked by people constricted by these patterns.

When I negotiate with an imagined body, the inertia of its imagined resistances is not simply something 'in my head': it is sedimented from the histories that have shaped my imagining. I am working with or against the whole training I have undergone, and that is written into my body, and I am working with the whole culture that sustains that training and with all that holds that culture in place. Imagined bodies can have almost immovable weight.

Inexhaustibility

Bodies are inexhaustible. That is not simply a claim about the astonishing diversity, complexity, and dynamism of matter – though

[6] Young, *Female Body Experience*, p. 33.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

it is worth leaving behind any picture we might have in which the world is constructed of building blocks Lego-like in their graspable simplicity. Even the humble proton – of which there are ten thousand times more in your body than there are stars in the known universe – can be described as 'the most complicated thing that you could possibly imagine … In fact, you can't even imagine how complicated it is.'[7] Matter is inexhaustible at a level still more fundamental than that, however. Consider what quantum mechanics shows us of the constitution of things. Within a particular configuration of equipment and observers, a body may reliably yield certain measurable properties. Within another configuration it may yield others. That does not mean, however, that the body in question can always be said to have both sets of properties prior to its expression of them within these configurations. Reality, it turns out, yields itself differently within different sets of relations and interactions, and – whatever our common sense tells us – we can't strip away all of those relations and interactions, peering behind the varying appearances until we find some well-behaved property-bearing substrate. What we encounter as matter only appears as such within these ongoing relations and interactions – indeed, what we encounter as time and space only appear as such within them too – and the same reality is always capable of appearing differently within different configurations.[8] It is not that matter does not exist, nor that its intransigence is an illusion. The stuff of which the universe is made does, within given arrangements and practices, put up specific resistances and leave specific marks; it yields reliable solidity, behaving within those

[7] Mike Williams of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, quoted by Charlie Wood and Merril Sherman, 'Inside the Proton, the "Most Complicated Thing You Could Possibly Imagine"', *Quanta Magazine*, 19 October 2022, https://bit.ly/4dziIdK. For an estimate of 10^{24} stars in the universe, see NASA, 'Star Basics', NASA.gov, 9 June 2023, https://science.nasa.gov/universe/stars/. An estimate of 10^{28} for the number of protons in the human body can be found in various online discussions.

[8] See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

arrangements as we think matter should. But the resistances and affordances or the forms of measurability and indeterminacy that the same body yields will be different within different arrangements.

Something similar is true of bodies as we know them within the ordinary practices of our lives. I am not now thinking of reality at the scale on which quantum mechanical effects overwhelm classical descriptions, but much more generally and prosaically. Bodies always yield themselves to being known within certain relations and practices – and they can be known differently within different configurations. In none of those relations and practices are the objects of knowledge translated in their entirety into the knower. The forms of knowledge generated are always relative to the specific nature of the interaction. As I said earlier: we see the face that bodies turn toward us. There is, therefore, always more to be known of any body, simply because there are always more relations into which a body can enter. We might say that every body has a depth or interiority to it that in principle comes into view only over the whole sequence of relations into which it can enter. And as there is no end to such relations, so there is no end to the ways in which this body might give itself to be known, and in a sense no end to what this body always already contains.

In living beings, this inexhaustibility of matter is redoubled. Living beings grow in the midst of their environments in ways shaped by all that they encounter; they respond to the world around them; they, their growth, and their responses bear the traces of their own pasts and of their long evolutionary histories. The ways in which matter yields itself differently within different relations are therefore given extra layers of complexity in living beings. There is no end to the forms that life can take, no end to evolutionary adaptation and where it might lead, no end to the ways living beings discover of making lives with one another and their wider environments.

To know another living being is, in its fullest sense, a matter of knowing how one might live well with them, or of knowing how

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

you and they might arrange a habitable life together. To know another living being involves discovering what their reality makes possible for your life together and what possibilities it excludes, just as they might discover what your reality makes possible and impossible for them. The unfathomable complexity of living beings and their adaptability in response to changing environments mean that there is never only one answer to that fundamental question – in fact, that there is in principle no end to the answers that can be given.

The inexhaustibility of human beings sits within this wider picture of the inexhaustibility of life, and in continuity with it. No one description or finite set of descriptions, no one relationship or set of relationships, can exhaust all that any human being is. There is always more to discover, for them and for those who relate to them. All that they have become, and all that they carry with them, can always yield itself differently. Surprise is an enduring human possibility.

The 'more' or 'surprise' that each other human being can yield emerges from the interaction between all that is in them and all that surrounds them (not that these two spaces can be clearly distinguished). It might be something generated in and by an encounter or relationship – something new to them as well as to you – but that new thing will still in some way draw on, and draw out, what is already there within them: drawing on or drawing out hidden content, or throwing already known content into new relief. Stephen David Ross puts it this way: 'There are, in the human body, an inevitable concomitant of its inexhaustibility in human experience, new and surprising connections, revelations of unknown forms of order and connection, hidden forms of awareness and significance.'[9] We can, then, say that there is no end to all that human beings are and carry with them, and no end to the life

[9] Stephen David Ross, *Inexhaustibility and Human Being: An Essay on Locality* (Fordham University Press, 1989), p. 43.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002

made possible by all of that. And we can say that there is no end to the ways in which their encounters and relations might supplement or change or catalyse or draw out all that is in them. Human beings have a kind of infinity to them, individually and together.

All the stories that I tell in the chapters that follow – stories about Jesus, about the many ways in which he is imagined, and about the lives that people build around those imaginings – are stories of inexhaustible bodies.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. UNIVERSIDAD AUTONOMA METROPOLITANA, on 19 Nov 2026 at 03:45:46, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use, available at https://www.cambridge.org/core/terms. https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009867016.002