THE BODY TRADE

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What happens after we die? This might be taken as an eschatological question, seeking some explanation or reassurance around the destiny of an immortal soul or some such vital element of our very being. But there is another sense that has at least as much importance. What should we do with dead bodies?

According to a Yougov survey from 2016, a majority of UK residents prefer cremation over burial, with their ashes scattered in some meaningful place. This could be good news, given the apparent dwindling of burial space globally. In the face of this sort of constraint, the reuse of graves becomes necessary, which can cause distress to the families of even the long dead.

Less commonly, dead bodies can be donated to medical science and put to use for purposes of research and medical training. Research suggests the rate is low owing to 'non-cognitive factors' such as the desire to maintain bodily integrity, worries that signing a donor card might 'jinx' a person, and 'medical mistrust' (Morgan et al. 2008).

Maybe we should think again about how we treat dead bodies. There could come a time when cremation and burial might be considered a waste of resources, given the uses to which cadavers can be put. One body can be used to train many surgeons in complex procedures by being pared into relevant sections – individual limbs, organ systems, brains. Nevertheless, while a corpse is indeed a valuable object, it was also previously a subject. The nature of bodies as post-persons does seem to deserve some special consideration. If we can account for this, we

doi:10.1017/S1477175618000398 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2019
Think 51, Vol. 18 (Spring 2019)

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175618000398 Published online by Cambridge University Press

might be in a position to recommend very generally why we ought to respect the bodies of the dead.

Reuters recently ran a series of articles exposing grim practices across what is an unregulated US market in cadavers. These reports contain some shocking details, many seeming to amount to mistreatment of dead bodies. For example, Reuters reports that 'Some brokers have saved money by using chainsaws to carve up the dead instead of more expensive surgical saws.' They also report underinvestment in essential items such as proper freezers for storage, and improper handling of cadavers: 'Health inspectors found a man in medical scrubs holding a garden hose. He was thawing a frozen human torso in the midday sun.' The *Guardian* recently printed a story of dentistry students posing for selfies with severed heads. Stories like these seem shocking on some gut level.

Why should we worry about this? We value living persons, rather than primarily living bodies. To the extent that the person's body is theirs, we expect good treatment of it. But we don't flinch at various mistreatments of living bodies – we tattoo and pierce them, we stress organs through drinking alcohol, we don't sleep or exercise enough.

When the living are injured physically, we process this as an affront to their person, with their body as the locus of that affront. We generally don't equate the person and their body. The loss of a limb, the donation of an organ, a change in physical appearance – these don't entail a change in the person.

In the case of dead bodies, the person is gone. That's one way of defining death, perhaps. In the language we use, when the dying person dies, we often shift into objective terms, signalling the change that takes place: 'Stephen was battling an illness, he lost the fight. Would you like to see the body?'

So, why are we concerned with what happens to dead bodies? Upon dying, the body becomes an object, and a valuable one. In terms of organ harvesting, and so on, this

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is already well known. Reuters' report makes clear that in whole body donation, bodies are often pared into useful sections according to factors such as surgical training needs. One body may therefore provide many opportunities for research across different fields and locations. Just as organs harvested from one body may save the lives of many, whole body donation may save a great many through training the medical professionals who will constitute the medical field in the future.

Does it matter how this comes about, given that the outcomes are almost certainly good for medical science? Are we merely being squeamish, or sentimental, about bodies when we react to stories of mistreated cadavers? Some of the uglier elements of body donation – the chainsaws, etc., mentioned above – arise in this area.

Our go-to instinct might be that there is an offence against the dignity of the dead. This is an initially appealing response, but becomes quite hard to cash out. 'Dignity' is a nebulous and fairly contestable notion. And, given that the body is an object after the death of the person, it isn't clear where the locus of dignity is or what its parameters might be. While it is appealing, it is not clear.

We might want to point to the thwarting of the person's dying wishes as a reason to object to mistreatment of dead bodies. Certainly, this has been the case where bodies have been used in military experiments without consent. But dying wishes, while generally things probably worth respecting to some extent, might nonetheless amount to an overburden. If you promise to wash my car, and I suddenly vanish out of existence, it would seem odd for you to go ahead. Similarly, if there are specific needs for cadavers, a poverty of supply, and complicated wishes from the now-dead, there are cases where it could be seen that those wishes might best be ignored.

What we seem to want to explain is that bodies are somehow sacred. That's probably why we feel an initial appeal to dignity is warranted. There are few things we can desecrate, besides holy places and things, and dead

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human bodies. But does 'sacred' suffer the same unclarity as 'dignity'?

There can be competing accounts of what exactly 'sacred' might mean, and what sacredness ought to entail. If we take something like Émile Durkheim's account, 'the sacred' generates taboos which serve the interests of the majority in a group, with the profane having a similar function.

Does treating a dead body carefully, maybe as if it were a sacred object, serve any interests? A majority of interests of a group don't seem to be at stake. Surely the interests of all are very well served through the furthering of medical research and training, and safety research, using donated bodies, possibly however they are treated. Analysis in terms of sanctity isn't clear.

Sacredness seems to be as evasive as dignity. We could ask: Is dignity sacred? Is sanctity dignified? And be unsure of which way around we ought to expect answers. In the light of the clear benefits to science and medicine offered by body donation, neither can really explain why we are, or if we ought to be, squeamish about unsanctioned military experiments, chainsaws, and cadavers.

Perhaps we have things the wrong way around. Maybe it isn't that human bodies require special treatment, but rather that any object that can have meaning to people deserves careful consideration. A rare proof of a first-edition book, say a copy of *Dubliners* saved from a publisher's fire, might be treated differently from a text file downloaded from the internet. The fact of that copy having played a role in the story of the ultimate publication of an important literary work makes it part of the story for a great many people. The rare copy, more than the file, gains pronounced significance. It would be worse if you were to destroy my copy than if you were merely to delete the file from my hard drive.

The fact that dead bodies are the objects that remain following the death of a person means that they are, to some at least, meaningfully connected to that person now gone.

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The psychological continuity that at least in part determines personal identity in life is, in death, outsourced to the minds of others in their memories of the dead. The body is a powerful signifier in this context, forming a focal point as prior nexus of psychological continuity.

Two influential accounts of personal identity centre upon bodily continuity and psychological continuity. Derek Parfit considers each of these and finds neither adequate to support a view of personal identity. Too much weight on the bodily criterion makes physical change difficult to resolve with personal identity. Too much weight on the psychological criterion makes personal identity hard to account for in cases of memory change. Perhaps surprisingly, Parfit goes on to reject personal identity as being of central importance. Instead, he focuses on psychological continuity as important in a more global sense of lived experience. The idea of a 'me' to be preserved or accounted for throughout change becomes a red herring, with the idea of psychological continuity taking over.

In place of personal identity as what is important about persons, Parfit's emphasis is on psychological continuity as what we really care about when we think about people. Through an interesting teleporter thought experiment, he goes as far as saying that it isn't really important if person X is 'the same' as person Y following transmission through a teleporter. What counts is that Y is someone who is psychologically continuous with X. The idea of a 'me' to be preserved or accounted for throughout change becomes a red herring, with the idea of psychological continuity taking over. That continuity is what's really valuable about persons. I want to extend this idea to how the dead might be considered to enjoy 'psychological continuity' despite their demise.

My, your, and anyone else's psychological continuity has ineliminable reliances beyond the self. While the individual person can certainly be seen as the locus of their own psychological continuity, the possibility for that continuity is embedded within relations among others. The very

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meaning one might hope to draw upon in the constructing of a self that can persist over time relies upon language and other practices among others. It might be obvious that psychological continuity is radically affected by the death of the person, but this may underplay the fact that much of who we are as living persons is entangled (for good or for ill) with others.

'The self' resides to this extent in the experiences of others as much as one's own. This isn't to say 'we' are some kind of collective consciousness, but there is an apparent case that we each partake in collected consciousness.

On death, Parfit writes,

> My death will break the more direct relations between my present experiences and future experiences, but it will not break various other relations. This is all there is to the fact that there will be no one living who will be me. Now that I have seen this, my death seems to me less bad. (Parfit 1984: 281)

True, the death of the person alters the nature of the psychological continuity that can persist. But it does not destroy everything about it. As long as the person is survived, there are remaining significant dimensions of that person – those various other relations – even though there is no one living who is identical with that person. This is the value of persons, through psychological continuity, without identity as the key factor.

Psychological continuity as a concept not wedded to an essential 'me' allows for a networked sort of idea of the self. My, your, and anyone else's psychological continuity relies on others and their ideas as much as it does on self-perception. While the individual person can certainly be seen as the centre of their own psychological continuity, the possibility for that continuity is tied up with relations among others.

This gives us some grounds for thinking of the dead as still continuing in some psychological sense. Their

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psychological continuity is present in the accounts that can be made of them by others. 'In memoriam' takes on a pretty major sense here – the dead really do persist 'in memoriam'. There's nothing supernatural in this. The absence of spookiness in this kind of explanation for the significance of the dead is a strength of the account. This is because it connects meaningfulness to persons directly, and locates it among persons. It's Parfit's 'various other relations' among experiences that remain unbroken by death that I suggest give reason to respect cadavers. These are the parallels of psychological continuity, networked out among others.

How does this lead to the conclusion that bodies ought to be treated respectfully? After all, if psychological continuity is what counts, and it can persist in a form despite the death of the person, the body surely falls out of the reckoning. Is it a mere object, which can be used entirely instrumentally?

The body is not insignificantly involved with the experiences of persons. Wittgenstein's remark that 'The human body is the best picture of the human soul' is one element in a broadly non-Cartesian account of the self (Wittgenstein 2009: PIII iv 25). Wittgenstein can be read as rejecting any notion of some mysterious substrate that houses the 'real' person. The body does not 'represent' the person, but through their body the entire person is 'open to view'. We can sensibly say, 'there is no more to the person than their body', but not mean thereby that the person is merely a body. Instead, we can mean that all that there is to the person is present in the body. This Wittgensteinian point isn't a diminishing of the person, but a demystification of a complicated term.

We can sum this up and relate it more widely to Wittgenstein's thought, as follows. Just as words cannot be separated from their meaning-as-use within a form of life, neither can the body be separated from the person as a set of variously linked experiences in a context of public entanglements. When we combine with this the Parfit-

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inspired rejection of personal identity, and the suggestion here that survivors carry dimensions of the dead's psychological continuity with them, the significance of the body is established. The dead body is as significantly bound to the person as the living body. The dead body is therefore due respectful consideration just as much as the living person.

Dead bodies are at least major plot points in the broad story of the person they used to be. To the extent that that person 'lives on' as memory, story, reminiscence, sentiment, in the lives of those who survive, the body remains a part of the life now lost. Treating it with care amounts to respecting the person, though they are gone, and the survivors who remember them.

While there is nothing in principle wrong with a trade in dead bodies as valuable objects, it ought to be remembered that they are significant objects too. The significance they have is nothing supernatural, but is related to the ways in which persons live, die, and are remembered. Wittgenstein's observation about the body as the 'best picture of the human soul' seems to correctly identify this importance for the body. Even though cadavers are valuable objects, they ought not to be treated as merely valuable objects. They ought to attract respectful treatment – no paring with chainsaws, no gratuitous selfies – just because they are as much located in meaningful networks as are living persons.

The dead body is as significantly bound to personhood as the living body is to persons. The dead body deserves respectful consideration just as much as any living person.

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175618000398 Published online by Cambridge University Press

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175618000398 Published online by Cambridge University Press