The year is 1985.

A rare snow hits the fall ground, capping the Douglas firs of Sacred Heart Hospital in Eugene, Oregon, heart of the Willamette Valley. I come into the world calm, almost uncannily so. Melodic acoustic guitar and the devout, haunting tenor of John Michael Talbot, a Roman Catholic monk, reverberate off four cold, sterile walls. A low hum, perhaps some devotions, a cassette player, or one of the many medical devices measuring beats, pressures, and saturations, calmly permeate the room as everyone realizes something is wrong. My right leg directly faces my left; it is turned all the way inward. I do not cry. I do not fuss. But that does not change the reality: I was born with a club foot.

To correct this congenital “defect” requires a simple and unremarkable “fix”: a surgery and a cast. Well, a few. Six months later, my right leg was in fact right, as it should be and should have been, in the eyes of all who care for me. I remember none of this.

Yet, it haunts me.

For most of human history, such a bodily fact ensured hasty death. Exposure, the practice of leaving infants with congenital disabilities out in the wilderness to die, has been attested across millennia. With the exception of those utilitarians who lack the capacity to differentiate between the economic and the moral, most people today find infanticide reprehensible for any reason except palliation of suffering in light of impending, inevitable death. However, this reprehension misleads, for nothing has fundamentally changed. We still practice exposure; we still judge the worth of a person, and even entire groups, based on their bodies. We still do so to the point of death. The only novelty is that we talk about it and carry it out differently these days.

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There are two features of embodiment – of the curiosity of embodiment, to invoke the work of Perry Zurn – that I wish to discuss. First, the narrowness with which we link worth to particular features of embodiment. Second, the expansiveness towards which embodiment opens us morally.

The idea of the life worth living is as old as human thought. Pick your tradition or epoch; whether it is characterized as religious, philosophical, ethnic, or cultural, one finds a constant:
humans are in the business of distinguishing the good from the merely extant, the what-should-be from the what-is. A staggeringly wide swath of intellectual and religious traditions across the ages agrees on this point: organisms like us are not content with how we find ourselves in the world. We instead strive to refashion our surroundings, to make new worlds, and to dream of, even worship, what might be.

Nonetheless, often we tightly tie the good, the desirable, and even the stakes of the divine to the state of our bodies: how our bodies are, how we work or fail to work upon them, and how they fit or misfit, to invoke Rosemarie Garland-Thomson’s sense of the term. It is human to link worth with body and body with worth. To be sure, I do not mean “body” in contradistinction to “mind.” Put better, then: it is human, all too human, to link worth with bodyminds.

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This brings us to the second claim: the expansiveness towards which embodiment opens us morally. Whether west or east, north or south, moral traditions take pains to bind normative force to experience. Some do so by appeals to universals, i.e., what everyone everywhere experiences or can experience; others do so by appeals to the singular, to the specifics of personal revelation. In the end, most traditions mix elements from both. For Aristotle, anyone with a good upbringing and basic material necessities has the “universal” tools to learn how to become singularly virtuous. For Kant, any person with reason is equipped with the “universal” tool necessary to cognize experience such that they come to recognize the moral law within. For Buddhist traditions, anyone with dedicated practice and perseverance can embark on the path to enlightenment. And this thinking is reverberated endlessly in other moral traditions as well.

Morality indeed takes work, but these traditions overcomplicate things. Being embodied in the way that humans are gives us all the tools we need to work towards our highest ethical ideals. It’s all here, right here, in the very way you are, and I am – and, crucially, in the way we are woven together in society. As Mark Johnson puts it in *Morality for Humans*, “Instead of trying to ‘ground’ our moral ideals in some allegedly universal or absolute source, we ought to ask how it is that creatures like us, inhabiting the kinds of physical, interpersonal, and cultural environments we do, come to have the values we do, and how it is possible for us to put them to the test of our ongoing personal and communal experience.” Value is not a function of the body; it is an outcome of bodymind interactions with the world. Bodyminds, a term first coined by Margaret Price, are what they are through interrelations.

To better grasp this claim, consider the work of disabled phenomenologist S. Kay Toombs. In a seminal 1995 article titled “The Lived Experience of Disability,” she writes: “For the person with a tremor, a bowl of soup is not simply ‘something to be eaten.’ It is a concrete problem to be solved. How does one get the liquid on to the spoon and then the spoon to one’s lips without spilling the contents?” Toombs is not making a claim about perception. It’s not that one person sees the bowl of soup as ready-to-hand, as an object for use to provide sustenance, and another sees it as in-the-way, as a problem to be overcome to achieve sustenance. It’s that the bowl of soup is different in its very essence for these two people. At the level of lived experience, the able-bodied person encounters a different “bowl of soup” than someone disabled through tremors.
In the same essay, Toombs writes, “I am embodied not in the sense that I have a body – as I have an automobile, a house, or a pet – but in the sense that I exist or live my body.” One’s body is one’s very “orientational locus in the world,” a world that is “always grasped in terms of a concrete situation.” Toombs here riffs on Simone de Beauvoir’s claim in The Second Sex that “the body is not a thing; it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project.” On this view, the body is neither something we “have” from which we act only insofar as we carry or inhabit it, nor is the body something we can shake off and ignore, like the sophomoric brain-in-a-vat futurists envision. My bodymind is the ground of the possibilities of which and for which I am. My bodymind is the foundation of that which is and can be for me. Is is for this reason that significant bodily changes provide such novel insights into how things are.

Toombs’ scholarship focuses on her experiences with degenerative Multiple Sclerosis (MS), with which she was diagnosed in 1973. As she describes her own research career, she uses her lived experience of MS to “reflect on issues relating to the experience of illness and disability, the phenomenology of the body, the care of the chronically and terminally ill, the challenges of incurable illness, the meaning of vulnerability, and the relationship between health care professionals and patients.” One of the primary features of degenerative MS is fluctuation in bodily function. She writes that “what is peculiar about this ‘seeing through the body’ in the event of changed bodily function is that it renders explicit one’s being as a being-in-the-world. A problem with the body is a problem with the body/environment.” Because the bodymind is not an in-itself, it is not a monolithic entity impermeable to the outside; it cannot be considered on its own; and objects that interact with the bodymind also cannot be as isolated from it (recall the soup). The idea that embodied consciousness is always embodied consciousness of something is the core insight of the phenomenological tradition, and I take that insight to bear much fruit when reflecting upon the history of philosophical thought on embodiment.

The phenomenological tradition demonstrates that “a problem with the body is a problem with the body/environment.” There are no pure bodily problems. There is no such absolute thing as a good, perfect body. Correspondingly, there is no such absolute thing as a “bad, corrupted body” (mochterou kai diephtharmenou somatos), despite Socrates’ utter confidence to the contrary in Plato’s Crito. There are only bodies we can care for well today and bodies we have yet to learn how to care for well. This offers just a glimpse of the expansiveness towards which embodiment opens us morally.

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We have such a long way to go to care well, and to learn how to care well, for most others – and not just human others. That is to say, the fate of the flight of human existence is still anyone’s bet.

After invoking the ordinary example of a mule going after a stick suspended at the end of a carriage it hauls, Sartre writes in Being and Nothingness, “we run toward ourselves and we are – due to this very fact – the being which cannot be reunited with itself.” There is a further meaning beyond the vacillation Sartre here rightly names – that dance between our ends as given and our ends as living projects. That meaning is the value we give to our running together.
I’m glad I wasn’t killed or left to die because of my club foot. I’m glad the society into which I was born wanted to run together with me, even if it turned out I couldn’t run. What made my right leg right was neither a cast, nor the handiwork of surgeons. It was the solidarity and community of others who saw me as their own and welcomed me with open arms into the world, “defects” and all.

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