

Writing Sample – Engagement Piece: Blaming Our Bodies

Blaming Our Bodies Part 1

<https://medium.com/@summon/blaming-our-bodies-b07717f6284b>

Why do we blame our bodies so much?

When I was a teenager, I was briefly hospitalized for an infection that had gotten out of control. This incident set into motion a new, fun narrative for myself about my body: it is weak and prone to illness. Without understanding why something that *should* have been resolved easily instead developed into something so dangerous, I resorted to blaming my body. Questions loomed unanswered in my mind: Why did I not get better on the medicine I was initially given? Why did I develop the infection in the first place when others did not? Why was I so weak?

Looking back, I see that these questions and the stories I invented to answer them were heavily influenced by many external things: my environment, my metaphysics, my Christian faith, my experiences as a ballet student, my developmental stage (puberty bites). The narrative that my body was deficient or worse than others' was not actually caused by my hospitalization — in fact, it wasn't *new* at all.

I had been cultivating these limiting beliefs about my body for several years. I had been practicing this self-blame and general bewilderment towards my body, learning through many more powerful sources than just the “media” that my body was wrong somehow. I will spare you my specific complaints about myself, as I’m quite sure that you all have stories like this of your own. Just finish these sentences to identify some of them: “why does my body have to be so _____”, “I wish my body were _____”, “I feel insecure when people comment about _____ around my body”.

Just witness your thoughts here. Please defer any judgment right now. We can get to challenging them in a few moments, but let’s get back to our story.

Looking back, I realize how difficult it would have been for me to go through a health crisis without internalizing a breaking of trust between my body and mind/soul self. Listen, just like

now, I was kind of a strange kid. I was really interested in philosophy and theology, and the ones that were available for me to learn about at that age were not very body positive to put it mildly. Apart from the okay refrain of “your body is a temple” (to the Holy Spirit, not to self; *1 Corinthians 6:19–20*), narratives around the body ranged from “the body is the prison of the soul” (Socrates, *Phaedo*) to “[bodies] are ... incapable of feeling or thought” (Descartes, described in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy), to the undenied body promulgating the “deeds of the flesh... which are: immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these” (the Apostle Paul, *Galatians 5:19–21*).

The philosophies I learned about not only degraded the body in favor of the mind or soul, but also separated mind and body, spiritual from material — with the body and material things being at best a limiting consequence of existing in this life by hosting the soul to at worst the cause of all our earthly suffering.

This is not exclusive to Christian philosophy (which was heavily influenced by Neo-Platonic philosophy) or popular Western philosophers like Descartes. Even some of my favorite atavistic “occult” philosophies and religions seem to conclude that the body is “senseless clay” to eventually be sloughed off by the superior mind/self/consciousness (Eleusinian Mysteries, described by Manly P. Hall in *The Secret Teachings of All Ages*).

Was it any wonder that I blamed my body? Resources on body positivity only appear to address body image or offer trite phrases like “listen to your body” or “love yourself” without any reason as to how or why we should do this. To me, there was no deeper antidote to the negative narratives about my body. My body was to be tamed, “gotten under control”, appeased so that I might function better. If I am my mind/soul/consciousness only — what further would my body matter apart from this?

Oddly enough, it was an appointment with another medical doctor that planted the seed of doubt in these beliefs I’d come to see as unfortunate truths. I told her that my body may be prone to infection based on what I learned from my experience as a teenager, and she suggested kindly that this might not be the right conclusion to draw. My body may not be singularly bad. As I considered her words walking to the train station from her office, I realized how freeing it would be to release this unique “badness” or weakness I’d placed on my body. As I breathed in the fresh air of that afternoon, I released a little of the body-blame and the self-blame of being inadequate somehow.

Over time, I also recognized that I was a bad ascetic (most are) and I wasn't fully committed to denying the self in order to be "holy" and "transcend". I wasn't convinced that I wasn't truly my body either! Teachings from scientific studies on human biology to basic psychology to modern modalities of healing introduced me to different ideas about how we interact with our bodies. I learned that our bodies are intelligent, remember things (not just simple muscle memory), and attempt to keep us safe ([Resmaa Menakem](#) and [Barbara Karlsen](#) are my favorite teachers here). I encountered the fact that the non-human bacteria in our guts affect our feelings, perceptions and behaviors (Alan Jasanoff, *The Biological Mind*). I confronted the fact that my body is a complex system that is here, that exists, that is constantly working to keep me alive. I can be grateful towards it and know that it is me (even if I am made up of more [alien bacteria than human cells](#)).

I find these new narratives so much more healthy, useful, and freeing than limiting, negative ones about our bodies. What would it be like for you to entertain these beliefs and foster a new relationship with your body instead?

There's so much more to say on this topic, so look for Part Two where we will examine how "Western culture" today views the body as a machine and what magick has to say about this. And if you are interested in examining your relationship with your body and challenging any limiting beliefs that come up, send us an email for a free journaling resource!

Blaming Our Bodies Part 2

<https://medium.com/@summon/blaming-our-bodies-part-2-6cc9115e0332>

What is your body? How do you understand it?

In the West today, the most pervasive metaphor for the body is one of a semi-functional, marvelously complicated machine. This concept of our bodies has evolved in tandem with a materialist philosophy that has no interest in the spiritual aspects of reality that challenge strict materialism's premise — namely, all that is truly real is definable in the materialist terms we've already agreed upon.

Perhaps surprisingly, the metaphor of body as a machine has been around for quite some time in varying degrees from da Vinci to Descartes — and grew in popularity after the Industrial Revolution into the early 20th century. In 1926, German physician Fritz Kahn illustrated the human body as an industrial-style machine (pictured above) and described it as "the most competent machine in the world". This idea brought to life through visual representations of

the body gave way to an unique appreciation for the body's workings and even the beauty of discrete parts working together to sustain life.

In many ways, scientists and philosophers have found this machine metaphor useful. Starting from the concept of the body as a complex machine gave us a reference point for understanding the body on a different level, with a unique and ever-evolving set of mechanistic terms. Instead of thinking of the body as essentially inanimate, “senseless clay” and “fleshy prison” that housed the spirit/mind/life force (as discussed in [Part 1](#) of Blaming Our Bodies), the body as machine metaphor eventually gave us a way to perceive the body as a system of interworking parts which have unique life-sustaining purposes and some level of intelligence. It allows us to describe the body and its functioning in more understandable, up-to-date, and acceptable terms. The metaphor serves as our template for studying, understanding, and improving the functioning of the body.

But this is just one metaphor. And now that we've stayed with this one framework for so long that it has pushed out any other way of understanding the body, we can clearly see that the body as machine metaphor leaves a lot to be desired.

We've left some important teachings behind which have different ways of conceiving and working with the body, such as energy medicine (a very broad category) and integration with the spiritual aspects of ourselves and reality. Leaving these unseen elements out of our understanding of our bodies severs us from the experience of the spiritual in the material, on the physical level. Our bodily senses serve only to report changes in our physical reality, to the functioning of our bodies to a limited extent. Understanding personal spiritual experiences, emotions, even pain and thoughts become so much more difficult under the hegemony of the body as machine metaphor. (This metaphor doesn't even quite work in a strictly materialist perspective or help most of us understand our bodies, surrounded by machines equally incomprehensible and occult to us).

Importantly, this metaphor only reinforces the deeply problematic divorce of spiritual and material, of mind and body, of the ephemeral spirit and physical aspects of ourselves.

As philosophy and technology evolved (and continues to do so), the body machine metaphor has made way for the brain as computer concept as well. This template for understanding the brain — sometimes equated with mind and consciousness — has been understandably fraught. The brain has long been the front line of the war between the mind and body. It is the physical space, the dissectible organ, where we attempt to understand the elusive consciousness, the ancient concept of “mind” and spirit. Unless, of course, we entertain the idea that

consciousness is non-local, not a product of the brain. Viewing the brain as a computer is deeply unsatisfactory, malignant growth from the body as machine dominant idea.

So, let's explore some alternatives. We can start with this question: how do you view your body?

"Your whole body is a divine intelligent being and not a machine with replaceable parts running out of steam" — Gordon White.

Setting aside the body as machine concept, there are other limited ways we understand and interact with our bodies. For instance, when I asked you how you viewed your body moments ago, did your self-image come to mind? This is one of the main ways in the current Western culture we generally think about our bodies. We might consider all the things we'd like to improve or change based on how we think "our society" sees us, how it values bodies. Apart from this, when we do think about our bodies it is usually around exercising in gyms, at the doctor's office testing our selves, during sexual encounters, while evaluating our diets, when trying on clothes, and of course when we are in pain, uncomfortable, or when we lose an aspect of our normal functioning.

In all these cases, we don't think of the body as our intelligent being or collection of intelligent beings. We think of how our bodies are functioning or more often not functioning the way we want them to. This way of seeing ourselves and valuing ourselves opens us to more opportunities to blame our bodies, internalizing perceived failings and inefficiencies. The way we think about our bodies — regardless of whether we are consciously *using* the body as machine metaphor — cuts off curiosity about ourselves and limits our beliefs about what we can do and perceive. Remember to consider the new beliefs: our bodies are knowledge keepers, our bodies are intelligent, and we can interface with the spiritual aspects of our reality through our bodies as well.

We badly need this new philosophy of the body, of the self.

Non-esoteric movements towards restoring the relationship between mind/self and body usually fall short. Simply asserting that you should pay attention to your body's needs, pointing out that your body informs your perceptions and behaviors, even that you should "love" your body so you can be happier is not enough. These band-aid narratives still do not value the body as an intelligent being, capable of much more than materialist philosophy allows for. Many self-love affirmations towards our bodies only exist so that we may no longer be openly

antagonistic to our bodies and so that we can improve functioning. We know that our current understanding about the body is not working for us.

“Your own body is a manifestation of God, and if you honor your body everything will change for you. When you practice giving love to every part of your body, you plant seeds of love in your mind, and when they grow, you will love, honor, and respect your body immensely” — don Miguel Ruiz, *The Four Agreements*.

We collectively lose magickal (really just essentially human) abilities when we dissociate from our bodies by seeing it as a semi-separate mechanistic entity we use to survive in this life. Whether we think of the body as our materialist prison or as a machine, we are pushing part of who we are into shadow, repressing aspects of our experience that don't comply with materialist metaphors. By viewing the body this way, as without intelligence, without energy, without the ability to interface with the intangible, we minimize spiritual experiences to the point where we lose the ability to sense them and know the world through them.

This is one of the most important workings of the magician, witch, occultist, or practitioner — to regain the ability to relate to the often invisible and more-than-human worlds, within the body and outside the body. This continual working essentially includes a better, more expansive philosophy of self.

It's time to embrace the deep healing of cultivating an esoteric philosophy of the self, including the body.