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Introduction: Evading the Body

In *The Devil’s Advocate*, Morris West wrote of a priest investigating the life of a man many considered a saint in a remote, poverty-stricken region of northern Italy. In the course of that investigation, this priest had one conversation that has long stood out for me. After briefing the local bishop on his work, the priest questioned the bishop’s use of church lands to model new forms of agriculture. The bishop replied that:

You can’t cut a man in two and polish up his soul while you throw his body on the rubbish heap. If the Almighty had designed him that way, he would have made him a biped who carried his soul in a bag around his neck. If reason and revelation mean anything they mean that a man works out his salvation in the body by the use of material things. (West 1959, 97)

However, at least in the West, debates about what makes for a fully or truly human life have long been preoccupied with the soul, or will, or other non-corporeal aspects of the self. And, in those debates, the body has often been neglected in the manner of West’s ‘biped’, with our essential nature treated as somehow detached or distant from our bodies.

This neglect is particularly true of much social policy in countries such as Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, especially in relation to income support. There debates have long focused on questions of measurement – of the lines above which one is no longer in poverty. Reams of text have been devoted to determining the appropriate level of intervention which, once passed, renders the body a pliant instrument. Just where that line should be drawn remains central to debate, with some protagonists believing some neglect or discomfort – some small denial or cruelty – is necessary to provide a goad towards engaging in
paid employment. We remain locked in what Michel Foucault (Dreyfuss and Rabinow 1982, 196–7) considered a ‘conflict of implementations’: a debate in which the founding assumptions are not contested – only the manner or form of actions in response to them.

This book is an endeavour to challenge the founding assumption that our bodies have only an instrumental role in living a full or truly human life. It is an effort to move beyond dualist models which, by treating our humanity as that of the ‘biped’ carrying ‘his soul in a bag’, enables social policy debates to treat our natures as largely independent of our bodies and the balance of the material world.

This book is also a response to the testimony of so many lives that their disadvantage and suffering were not due to any lack of effort or commitment on their part. It reflects their stories and the hurt and humiliation they have suffered. One meeting with a group of refugees is still fresh in my memory. One man, displaying great courtesy, explained to me how much money he received to support his family. He went on to show me the textbook list from the school his children attended and how he could afford to buy the books for only one child. He asked me how he should go about choosing between them. I had no answer for him then (or now).

Through this book I hope to support a better response and to help provide the foundation for policies and practices that take into account something too often and too easily forgotten: the influence of the material or corporeal world. But that is not all. This book also reflects other influences in my life. In particular, it has been shaped and informed by my experience as a ballroom dancer. In dance I have found a sense of joy and fulfilment in my body and in bodily interactions that multiply those pleasures. To dance is to experience one’s humanity as expanded rather than limited by the corporeal. This book, then, draws on a deepening appreciation of the role of the materiality of my own self, and the centrality of that materiality to human expression. I have felt the expansiveness of my self in my body – and its independence and resistance – and seen it in others, too. As these very words suggest, with their distinction between my ‘self’ and my ‘body’, I have also encountered the lack of an adequate language to express those experiences.

I sought, and found, that better language in Marx’s works. While many others have considered the role of the body, as I canvass below, I turned to Marx because of a shared opposition to liberal theory’s influence on Western society (and particularly on social policy). Today, with the return of the same forms of liberalism that Marx contested, with their vision of the self-reliant, ruggedly independent individual and emphasis on ‘austerity’ measures, Marx’s critique of those ideas has a renewed relevance. Marx (1975e, 390) considered our humanity in