Body Politic
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INTRODUCTION

This book attempts to track the idea that there is an analogy between the social collective and the individual human body from its origins more than twenty-five centuries ago to the present day.

It is not a History of Ideas, a contribution to Intellectual History, in the conventional sense, exemplified by studies such as Tilman Struve’s *Die Entwicklung der Organologischen Staatsauffassung im Mittelalter*, or F.W. Coker’s aged, but still not superannuated, *Organismic Theories of the State*, though both these books pointed me to valuable material. Historians of Ideas look around and about the concepts they discuss, and seek to elucidate them as an intellectual phenomenon in relation to other intellectual and ideological developments and the overall intellectual framework of a specific period. This might work with a long book covering a short period, but cannot be expected in a short book covering a long period. In any case, I was less interested in the intellectual context of the analogy of body and society than with its relationship to the real world of political and military action. There are books, respected but regarded as somewhat tangential to the academic tradition of Intellectual History, on ideas in relation to literature, such as George Hale’s *The Body Politic: a Political Metaphor in Renaissance in English Literature* or E.M.W. Tillyard’s *The Elizabethan World Picture*, both of which I have found very useful: this book, though it may not be fully apparent in the first three chapters, is about an idea in relation to assassination, subversion, invasion, and the exercise of power.¹

Historians of Ideas, in focusing on an idea in its time as an idea, tend to imply that the particular idea they are interested in was a pretty big, important, influential, characteristic idea in that particular period. (They may state that this is not what they think, but the fact that they have written a whole book about the idea in question gives the lie to any caveat they tack on to it.) The analogy of body and society, it seems to me, was probably quite marginal in institutional and cultural terms before, say, 400 A.D., and thereafter for more than a thousand years was chiefly important as one of the ways state functionaries, whether government administrators or clergymen – frequently they were the same people – explained their
role to themselves. After 1500 the analogy crops up very frequently in political discourse but nevertheless probably had rather less influence as a political idea than simpler conceptions such as the notion of legality or the need to submit to the ordinances of God. In the Nineteenth Century the idea was taken seriously by pioneer political sociologists but their work had much less influence than Aristotle’s *Politics*, their ultimate model and still the political treatise that was most widely studied, and had much less enduring interest than Tocqueville’s and Bagehot’s less abstract discussions of actual political practice, or Karl Marx’s explorations of the underlying mechanisms of power and exploitation. By the Twentieth Century the analogy of body and society had become something of a historical curiosity, an element of nursery fantasy that had somehow invaded statecraft – yet it was in the Twentieth Century that the idea came closest to offering a programme for action.

We can perhaps see the idea moving between different constituencies. Early exponents like Plato and Cicero were, or wanted to be, working politicians; then the functionaries, the civil servants, took the idea over; then the intellectual theorists and the academics; only in the Twentieth Century was the idea appropriated by those who had a share in controlling the means of destroying the state. But this summary implies a reading of history that emphasizes the idea at the expense of its context. The idea of the analogy of body and society certainly became elaborated over the centuries, but social and political structures developed and evolved at the same time: it was not so much a case of an idea moving between constituencies, as of the constituencies themselves moving and developing. The history of an idea about society must to a great extent be a history of society.

It might be argued that the history of the idea that there is a resemblance between society and the human body should also be a history of the body. I am familiar with the work of Ted Polhemus and Mary Douglas, and with Susan Sontag’s *Illness as Metaphor*, and have myself published articles on the history of the way men perceive women as physical entities: if there is less about the human body as such in this book than one might have expected, it is certainly not because I was unaware of the possibility of research on the subject. As I shall show, developments in knowledge with regard to the circulation of the blood, the spread of infectious diseases and the functioning of the nervous system certainly introduced new aspects into the discussion of the Body Politic, but in a sense the body that featured in comparisons of body and society did not
have a historical dimension. The essential appeal of the Body Politic idea was always that it referred to something with which everyone was completely familiar, something which was the basic, unalterable fact in human existence. Society has changed immeasurably in the past 2,500 years but as far as most people are concerned, hands, mouth, and belly have remained more or less the same as they were in Aesop’s time.²
CHAPTER ONE
AESOP AND OTHERS

It is impossible to say when or where it was that political society was first compared to the human body. In the Rig-Veda, the collection of Sanskrit hymns that is the oldest religious text of the Hindus, there is an account of the gods sacrificing Purusa (the archetype of mortal man, or the human race personified) and creating different social classes from the different parts of his body:

The Brahman [priests] was his mouth, of both his arms was the Rajanya [warriors] made.
His thighs became the Vaisya [shepherds], from his feet the Sudra [servants] were produced.

Most of the Rig-Veda dates from around 1500 B.C. but the particular hymn describing the dividing up of Purusa appears to be somewhat more recent: its metrical characteristics suggest a composition between 1000 B.C. and 500 B.C.. On the other hand there is nothing to prove that the general idea of the hymn is not much older.¹

The same idea of the analogy between the community and the body is to be found in Aesop’s fable of the Belly and the Members, in which the Hands and the Feet denounce the Belly for eating everything and doing nothing, and refuse to give it any more food, with the result that they waste away till they are too weak to feed the Belly even if they want to. This version may date from much the same period as the hymn in the Rig-Veda. Aesop was almost certainly a historical figure of the Sixth Century B.C., born in Thrace or Phrygia. The fables associated with him seem however not to have been written down or disseminated as a written text either during his lifetime or during the first two centuries after his death: the earliest known version, a redaction in Latin verse by a freedman at the court of Augustus and Tiberius named Phaedrus or Phaeder, born about 15 B.C., is believed to have been based on texts assembled by Demetrios of Phaleron, governor of Athens 317 – 307 B.C. and thereafter an exile in Egypt, but these do not survive. The literature of classical
Greece was oral rather than written – drama of course was presented on the stage, poetry whether epic or lyric was recited from memory, even Herodotos’s history may have been partly published in readings before different audiences before the manuscript became available. When Socrates decided to make a verse version of Aesop’s fables while in prison awaiting sentence of death, he did so ‘because they were stories I knew and had handy’ – i.e. knew by heart. This lack of an early text means that there is no proof that the fable of the Belly and the Members was amongst the original Aesop stories. It differs from most of the others in not having animals as its protagonists. It might well have been tacked on to the Aesop collection some centuries later.2

If the fable of the Belly and the Members was only added in the Aesop canon at a later date, a possible source would be a passage in Titus Livy’s history of Rome, written during the first years of the Christian era. Livy tells how, when the common people defected from Rome in the early days of the Republic, the patricians sent Menenius Agrippa to persuade them to return. Menenius told the commons how, ‘In the days when all parts of man were not as now in agreement, but each member had its own ideas and speech, the other parts felt it improper that by their care and hard work and service the stomach acquired everything, while lying passively in their midst enjoying itself; so they agreed that the hands would not carry food to the mouth, nor the mouth take in anything offered, nor the teeth chew. . . . . ’ The same story was told of Menenius Agrippa by Plutarch in his life of Coriolanus a century later, Livy being presumably the source, and from Plutarch it was taken over by Shakespeare in Coriolanus Act I Scene 1 (see below, page 27). It has been suggested that Livy himself borrowed the story from a historical work, which is now entirely lost, by Quintus Aelius Tubero, who died probably only a few years prior to Livy’s birth, and that in any case the story was actually Greek in origin, possibly deriving from a contemporary of Aelius Tubero, the Stoic philosopher Hecaton. This view would make the story no older than the first Century B.C. but there is no actual evidence that the story was not told to the revolting commons by a man called Menenius Agrippa around 484 B.C., and if the story was told by Menenius Agrippa, there is nothing to show whether it was a story he made up himself or a folk narrative he had first heard from his grandmother.3

Another version of the society-body analogy is found in the Book of Daniel, in the Old Testament. The Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar dreams of an enormous statue with a head of gold, chest and arms of

Body Politic: Political Metaphor and Political Violence
The earliest comparison of any sort between political society and the human individual that can be dated with certainty to within a few years, and attributed to a particular author, is that made by Plato in The Republic, written about 380 B.C.. Plato does not in fact draw an analogy between specific physical organs of the human body and the components of society. In one passage he argues a parallel between the intellectual, spiritual and physical parts of the individual (i.e. reasoning faculties, anger, sense of honour, morale and bodily appetites) and corresponding principles in the state. In another section he suggested that it would be useful to disseminate a myth of the foundation of the state, in which rulers and their soldiers ‘were fashioned and reared in the depths of the earth. . . But when God fashioned you, he added gold to the composition of those of you who are qualified to be Rulers (which is why their prestige is greatest), he put silver in the soldiers, and iron and bronze in the farmers and the rest.’ These two passages, read alongside the (apparently later) account of Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in the Book of Daniel, rather suggest that Plato was familiar with fables as narratives that involved an identification with social groups, human faculties, and metals. (Bearing in mind that the Book of Daniel seems to have been written as anti-hellenizing propaganda, it would be ironical if Plato, or some earlier Greek text now lost but known to Plato, was one of its sources.) The two passages in The Republic are interesting as examples of parallels between the body-society analogy and other traditional narratives about body parts or social groups that do not emphasize the analogy as such. Perhaps the
oldest of these is a fragmentary account of a court case arising from a
dispute over precedence between the Head and the Belly, preserved in a
piece of an Egyptian schoolroom book consisting of thin boards covered
with linen and plastered over and painted red, dating from the last years of
the Twentieth Dynasty – around 1100 B.C. – and discovered by the French
Egyptologist Gaston Maspero in the Drovetti collection in the Museum of
Antiquity in Turin. ‘It is I, it is I, the rafters of the whole house – from
which the beams issue and where they join together . . .’ says the Head. In
the huge Indian epic poem *Mahabharata*, which belongs to the first half of
the First Millennium B.C., there is an account of a dispute between the
Mind and the Senses. The Mind claims, ‘Without me the Nose does not
smell, the Tongue does not detect taste. The Eye does not see colour, the
Skin does not feel touch, the Ear does not hear when I am not there.’ The
Senses respond that without them, the Mind does not experience anything.
There is an elaboration of this in a commentary on the *Vedas* that may be
of the same antiquity. The first created man tried to take food by means of
speech, but it was impossible to take food simply by mentioning food; he
tried to take food by means of exhaled breath, but it was impossible to
take food simply by breathing on it or by looking at it with his eyes, or by
listening to it with his ears, or by touching it with his skin, or by thinking
about it with his mind, or by ejaculating on it with his penis; he then
wonders, ‘If speaking is done through speech, if breathing is done through
exhalation, if seeing is done through sight, if hearing is done through
hearing (listening), if touching is done through the skin, if thinking is done
through the mind, if ejaculating is done through the penis – then who am
I?’

Joseph Jacobs, the late-nineteenth century folklorist and writer on
Jewish affairs who first pointed out the parallels between Aesop’s Belly
and Members fable and other traditional narratives, thought it probable
that they did not derive from a common source but were simply instances
of parallel occurrence. Since these various fables (or various versions of
the same fable) were originally made up, or disseminated, in societies that
either had not yet developed writing or else were only in part accustomed
to the preservation of written records, we cannot expect to find any
conclusive evidence one way or another. Two aspects suggest however
that Jacobs was incorrect in his surmise and that the fables do in fact
belong to a single tradition. First, most of the different versions derive
from Indo-European cultures. The two exceptions are the Egyptian school
book reported by Gaston Maspero and the Book of Daniel. The suspicious
parallel between the gold and silver body parts of the giant in
Nebuchadnezzar’s dream in the Book of Daniel and the gold and silver in Plato’s Republic has already been mentioned. There is also the possibility that the Egyptian narrative is actually of Hittite origin. During the Thirteenth Century B.C. a war between the Hittites and the Egyptians was concluded by a peace treaty, mutual defence pact and, eventually, the marriage of Pharaoh Rameses II to a daughter of the Hittite King Hattusilis III. We may assume a degree of commercial and cultural interchange between the two empires during the ensuing years, which happened incidentally to be the period in which Moses led the people of Israel in their flight from Egypt. The Hittites, like the authors of the Rig-Veda and its contemporaries, like the Greeks and the Romans, were Indo-European. As far back as 1786 Sir William Jones suggested that not only the languages of northern India but also the religious pantheon of the Hindus were related to the language and religion of ancient Greece and Rome. ‘I am persuaded,’ he told the Asiatic Society, ‘that a connexion subsisted between the old idolatrous nations of Egypt, India, Greece and Italy, long before they emigrated to their several settlements, and consequently before the birth of Moses.’ Later scholarship has ejected the Egyptians from the equation but amply confirmed the identity of the grammatical structures underlying the languages of present-day northern India, Iran and most of Europe. The pagan pantheon is slightly more problematical: there are certainly non-Indo-European elements in the modern Hindu pantheon, and the identification of gods in the Greek pantheon with local deities has obscured probable non-Indo-European elements in the religion of classical Greece and Rome, but it remains plausible that the ancient gods are, along with grammar, the only traditions that have survived in identifiable form from the non-material part of the culture of people living in the European-Asian borderlands more than ten thousand years ago. Just as vocabulary appears to be much less durable than grammar, so the actual names of gods seem to have been less stable than their personal attributes: the Norse Odin is identifiably the Greek Hermes, promoted from Messenger of the Gods in the Greek Pantheon to Chief of the Gods in the Norse, by some process that prefigures the usurpations of power by Spin Doctors and public relations experts in modern times, the Norse Thor is identifiably the Greek Zeus. It may be that certain traditional narratives have been equally durable.

The second reason for suspecting a connection between these fables is that they are not just stories, they are stories told with a political or at least ideological purpose. The dispute between the Mind and the Senses in the Mahabharata seems merely to make a point about arrogance
and overlooking the obvious, but in the version in the Vedic commentaries it becomes something like a reflection on self-knowledge, motive and personal identity. The *Rig-Veda*’s account of the creation of different classes of men from different parts of Purusa’s body suggests a hierarchic ordering of the social classes, and this hierarchy is brutally insisted upon in a later version, from about 1000 A.D.: ‘there sprang from his [Brahma’s] mouth beings especially endowed with the quality of goodness, others from his breast pervaded by the quality of foulness, others from his thighs, in whom foulness and darkness prevailed; others from his feet, in whom the quality of darkness predominated. These were in succession, beings of the several castes, – Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas and Sudras.’ In a number of instances the narrative, as it has come down to us, is framed in a prior narrative that specifically emphasizes a political context. Even the Egyptian school book version locates the dispute between the Head and the Belly in a law court, a place where the individual confronts the authority of the community. In Livy’s version Menenius Agrippa uses the fable to persuade the Roman plebs that they must return to their allegiance. Nebuchadnezzar uses his dream as a test of the probity of ‘the wise men of Babylon’. Plato presents his account of the Rulers and their soldiers being made with gold and silver, and the farmers and the rest with iron and bronze, as a possible candidate for a kind of foundation myth which a state might adopt as a key element in political indoctrination, ‘a fairy story like those the poets tell about the sort of thing that happened “once upon a time”’ . . . I doubt if people would believe it without a lot of persuasion . . . but you might succeed with the second and later generations. . . it should serve to increase their loyalty to the state and to each other.’ In Livy’s account of Menenius Agrippa he presents the fable of the Belly and the Members as a useful analogy, such as a politician might employ in a speech to a popular gathering; in *The Republic* Plato’s emphasis is not on the analogy, or on its applicability in certain circumstances, or on a specific instance of the fable being used: what Plato is interested in is the general principle of the usefulness, from a political point of view, of such fictions in political indoctrination. He may well have had particular instances in mind; he is unlikely, in 380 B.C., to have heard anything much of events in Rome, but he might have had a recollection of some form of the analogy between body and state being employed in a political speech in the way Menenius Agrippa reportedly employed it. He was almost certainly acquainted with his contemporary the Athenian general Iphicrates, who was said to have compared ‘an army marshalled for action to the human body. The phalanx he called the breast, the light-armed troops the hands, the cavalry the feet, and the general the
head. If any of the inferior parts were wanting, the army, he said, was
defective: but if it lacked a general it lacked everything.”
It seems then that the tradition of comparing political society to the human body predates 400 B.C. and may be much older. A passage in his First Epistle to the Corinthians suggests that St Paul may have known more than one version of the tradition, including some form of the version utilized in the Mahabarata and the commentaries on the Vedas relating to the primacy of the different senses and faculties of the body. St Paul wrote:

the body is one, and has many members. . . if the foot shall say, because I am not the hand, I am not of the body, it is not therefore not of the body. . .
If the whole body were an eye, where were the hearing? . . . And the eye cannot say to the hand, I have no need of you: or again the head to the feet, I have no need of you.

In this instance the community which St Paul is likening to a body is the community of faith, not a territorial or national entity, and this emphasizes the community and conceptual aspect: the body is compared to a group of people bound together not by the physical circumstances of geography but by spiritual and intellectual relationships. This and other passages in St Paul are almost certainly the greatest single influence in establishing in later popular consciousness the idea of a community as a kind of body, which is remarkable in that he was writing at a time – the middle of the First Century A.D. – when the Mediterranean world was governed by an empire which seems to have showed little interest in fostering a unified communal consciousness in the territories over which it exercised, by treaty, conquest or colonization, an often unsympathetic control: St Paul himself, who by an unexplained accident of birth belonged to the relatively small section of the general population that had Roman citizenship, was himself capable of pulling rank on those of inferior civic status when he found himself in trouble with local officials.1

Among the elite in Rome itself, it is probable that only the Aesop and Livy versions of the society-body analogy were known. Cicero’s
remark about *nervos belli, pecuniam infinitam*, the sinews of war, unlimited money, is an interesting elaboration, but when he wrote, ‘if each limb had the notion of strengthening itself by drawing off the health of adjacent limbs, it would necessarily weaken and kill the whole body’, he was more or less within the tradition of Menenius Agrippa’s speech to the common people, as is Seneca’s enquiry, a couple of generations later, ‘what if the hands should desire to harm the feet, or the eyes the hand?’

Cicero found himself on the losing side in the political contest that followed the assassination of Julius Caesar and was put to death; Seneca was implicated in a plot against the Emperor Nero and was obliged to commit suicide. The mechanisms of power in the later Roman Republic and in the Roman Empire rarely lent themselves to objective and open-minded discussion in the schools and universities of Rome and the provincial capitals. At the same time a growing need for administrators and lawyers ensured that political science of a sort was taught and discussed, even in the reigns of Domitian or Heliogabalus. Perhaps the best example of the kind of sanitized political science involved, apparently referring to an idealized version of the practice of some centuries previously, is to be found, not in a political text as such, but in a commentary on Plato’s *Timaeus* by one Calcidius, a neo-Platonist philosopher who flourished either about the beginning, or during the middle years of the Fourth Century:

> the order of the commonwealth imitates the divine order: the head occupies the chief place and holds dominion over the other members, being the seat of wisdom... so the senators in the higher place, that is at the citadel of the city, look after the lower orders and give them movement and action. Below the head are the hands which are ready to act, and the heart which is the seat of courage. Similarly below the senatorial rank there are soldiers ready for duty and brave in defence of the commonwealth. Below the heart are the kidneys in which flourish human desires. Thus below the soldiers are confectioners, shoemakers, hide-trimmers and other craftsmen. And last of all there are the feet, which are farmers cultivating the soil in the suburbs beyond the city wall.

This seems to belong to some sort of established tradition both of dividing society into classes and of elaborating analogies between bodily organs and the organs of government. An anonymous commentary on Justinian’s Institutes (a legal primer for law students officially adopted by the Roman government in A.D. 533) claimed that the Emperor was like the head and stated that:
After the Emperor come the *illustres*, who are like the eyes of the Emperor. After the *illustres* are the *spectabiles*, like hands. After the *spectabiles* are the *clarissimi*, like the chest. After the *clarissimi* are the *pedanei*, like the feet of the Emperor, and judges in lower courts.

This reads like an over-simplified and rather dull version of someone else’s more interesting formulation: the terms *illustres*, *spectabiles* and *clarissimi*, all of which might be translated as ‘notables’, seem in this instance to refer merely to different grades of judge; *pedanei* were the lowest grade of judge, with cognizance only in minor cases. If the text referred to six centuries later as the ‘Institution of Trajan’ ever existed (see below) it might well have been a source for the passage just quoted. Similarly Corippus, the last great epic poet of Roman times, in his *In Laudem Iustini*, circa A.D. 567, may well have been borrowing an idea from a political treatise when he wrote, ‘taxes are the counterpart of the stomach, through which all the limbs are fed. The stomach nourishes the body. If the stomach is empty, then everything is lacking.’

A great deal of what men (and women) laboured over in antiquity and during the Middle Ages has not survived, and often what has come down to us has done so only by a freak of good luck. About a quarter of Livy’s History of Rome – thirty-three complete and three incomplete books out of the 142 he wrote – survived the Middle Ages. The Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*, which was probably composed before A. D. 750, survives only in a manuscript dating from more than two centuries later, now in the British Library. Hrotsvith, the tenth-century nun of Gandersheim who wrote adaptations of the works of the Roman playwright Terence and is today celebrated as Germany’s first woman poet and as much the best instance of the survival of the culture of the Roman Republic into the Dark Ages, is known only because of a manuscript now in the State Library at Munich, which was discovered in the monastery at St Emmeran and published by the humanist poet Konrad Celtis at Nuremberg in 1501. The most influential text on the body politic theme amongst readers of Arabic was Al-Farabi’s treatise on the Perfect State (*Mabādī’ Ārā Ahl Al-Madīna Al-Fādila*), dating from the Tenth Century, which almost certainly incorporates material from writings in Greek from the Fourth Century onward that are now lost:

The heart is the ruling organ. . . It is followed in rank by the brain. . . [which] may be compared to the steward in a household; for the steward himself is subordinate to the master. . .
The excellent city resembles the perfect and healthy body, all of whose limbs co-operate to make the life of the animal perfect and to preserve it in this state... there being among them one ruling organ...

The parts of the city which are close in authority to the rulers of the city perform the most noble voluntary actions, and those below them less noble actions, until eventually the parts are reached which perform the most ignoble actions... although they may be extremely useful -- like the action of the bladder and the action of the lower intestine.4

Amongst manuscripts that did survive the Middle Ages was a single copy, dating from the Ninth Century, of Phaedrus’s version of Aesop’s Fables (now in the Pierpoint Morgan Library, New York), and several copies of Calcidius’s commentary on Plato’s Timaeus, which seems to have been the source of a passage in Cardinal Humbert’s Adversus Simoniacos, written about 1055:

the clerical order leads the church just as the eyes lead the head... The secular power is like the chest and arms, strong and ready to obey and defend the church. Then comes the common people like the lower members, equally subordinate and necessary to the ecclesiastical and the secular power alike.

A century later William of Conches, in his Glosae super Platonem, seems to have been following Calcidius even more closely when he suggested that:

in the citadel of the city is the senate, as in the upper part of the head there is wisdom, below them is the military just as there is courage in the heart, below which are the confectioners, just as there are lusts in the lower body. And just as at the lowest level the brutish feet tread the ground, so husbandmen and hunters and shepherds work the lands beyond the city walls.5

Among the pupils of William of Conches at the Schools of Paris from 1138 to 1141 was John of Salisbury, later an intimate of Thomas Becket -- he was with Becket in Canterbury Cathedral shortly before the archbishop’s murder, though he had fled by the time the murderers struck -- and of the English-born Pope Adrian IV, and perhaps the most learned writer of his time. In his best-known work, Polieraticus, John of Salisbury brought together a number of earlier versions of the body-state analogy:

The position of the head in the republic is occupied, however, by a prince subject only to God and to those who act in His place on earth, inasmuch as in the human body the head is stimulated and ruled by the soul. The place of the heart is occupied by the senate, from which
proceeds the beginning of good and bad works. The duties of the ears, eyes and mouth are claimed by the judges and governors of provinces. [iudices et praesides provinciarum] The hands coincide with officials and soldiers. Those who always assist the prince are comparable to the flanks. Treasurers and record keepers [quaestors et commentarienses] (I speak not of those who supervise prisoners, but of the ministers of the private estates) resemble the shape of the stomach and intestines; these, if they accumulate with great avidity and tenaciously preserve their accumulation, engender innumerable and incurable diseases so that their infection threatens to ruin the whole body. Furthermore, the feet coincide with peasants perpetually bound to the soil, for whom it is all the more necessary that the head take precautions, in that they more often meet with accidents while they walk on the earth in bodily subservience; and those who erect, sustain and move forward the mass of the whole body are justly owed shelter and support. Remove from the fittest body the aid of the feet; it does not proceed under its own power, but either crawls shamefully, uselessly and offensively on its hands or else is moved with the assistance of brute animals.

In a later passage he has Pope Adrian IV recounting a version of the Belly and Members fable, in this instance involving eyes, hands, feet and tongue; no source is offered for the fable but John of Salisbury attributes the account just quoted of the organs of the republic to a document he calls the Institution, or Instruction, of Trajan (Institutio Traiani), supposedly a kind of statesman’s manual drawn up by Plutarch for the Emperor Trajan, who ruled Rome from A.D. 98 to 117. The only thing known with virtual certainty about the Institutio Traiani is that neither Plutarch nor Trajan had anything to do with it. Janet Martin has suggested that John of Salisbury simply invented this otherwise unknown text as a kind of donnish joke, one of several inserted into the text of Policraticus in such a way that they would be recognized for what they were by appreciative admirers amongst the truly learned, while deceiving the merely half-educated. Even if this was the case, his employment of terms like praesides provinciarum, commentarienses and comites rerum privatarum, which had long ceased to have any current application and might have bemused even the truly learned, suggest that he had a source at least for some of his vocabulary. He may well have found it, either without any authorial attribution, or with an attribution he had no cause to question, in one of the florilegia, books of extracts, in Canterbury Cathedral Library, or in one of the collections that he would have inspected in Rome and Benevento during his extended visits to Italy. The anonymous commentary on Justinian’s Institutes indicates that text books describing administrative structures in terms of body parts had existed in the Sixth Century. On the other hand, as a pupil
of William of Conches, John of Salisbury almost certainly knew William’s *Glosae super Platonem*; the analogy of state and body in that work, plus some comparison of taxes and the stomach such as found in Corippus’s *In Laudem Iustini*, and some archaic bureaucratic jargon picked up anywhere, might have given John of Salisbury all that he needed. Subdividing by class had been commonplace since at least the early Eleventh Century, when Adalbero of Laon’s *Carmen ad Rotbertum Regem* had suggested a distinction between bellatores, laboratores and oratores – those who fought, those who laboured and those who prayed. The only things that are particularly new in his presentation are the suggestion that excess accumulation in the stomach threatens the health of the whole body, and the notion that the prince needs to take special care of his peasants, as the feet that support the whole organism. Neither idea seems to belong to the political context of John’s lifetime: excessive accumulation of economic resources in the capital city may have been a problem in Imperial Rome, and later in Constantinople, but hardly seemed a plausible danger in the conditions of twelfth-century England, and the feudal system involved, not the special attention of the king to his peasants, but the virtual abandonment of the peasantry to the tender mercies of lords of the manor; but of course the political horizons of international scholars like John of Salisbury were not confined to the framework of English feudalism.6

*Policraticus* was widely read during the Middle Ages. About thirty copies are known to survive in manuscript, as compared to only four of an anonymous treatise dating from the 1300s known as *Rex Pacificus*, which itself had a significant influence on later writers with its claim that the pope corresponded to the head of the social organism while the temporal power corresponded to the heart, with laws, statutes and customs as the counterpart of the veins issuing from the heart. *Policraticus* was also, in 1372, translated into French for King Charles V’s library in the Louvre. Copies of this translation were also made, one of them, preserved in the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève, dating from as late as the second half of the Fifteenth Century. Amongst the authors who knew of *Policraticus* was Christine de Pizan who in her *Livre de Corps de Policie* of 1406 borrowed the comparison of prince with head, knights with hands and labourers as feet, and followed John of Salisbury in claiming the *Institutio Traiani* as source. *Policraticus* was however nothing like as popular as Aesop’s Fables. The passage in *Policraticus* in which the Pope recounts the fable of the Belly and the Members as a piece of rare wisdom may arguably be taken as an indication that Aesop was scarcely known in
John of Salisbury’s day, but in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries a
text of Aesop dating from the Fourth Century began to reach a
considerable audience: there are no fewer than 170 surviving copies of
medieval transcriptions of this version, plus thirty or so copies of various
adaptations in Latin, and twenty-three surviving copies of a French verse
translation by Marie de France, who is believed to have been a lady at the
court of Henry II and may even have been personally known to the author
of *Policraticus*. There was also a mid-fourteenth century version in
German verse, by a Dominican friar named Ulrich Boner. In the second
half of the Fifteenth Century there were to be at least fifty separate
printings of the fables, in five separate countries. It would appear that,
whatever its status a few hundred years earlier, by the Fifteenth Century
the fable of the Belly and Members must have been one of the most
familiar of political analogies.7

Aesop’s Fables seem to have been of particular interest to
members of the Dominican Order, perhaps because of their utility as raw
material for sermons. The fable of the Belly and the Members is to be
found in the *Speculum Doctrinale* of the Dominican encyclopaedist
Vincent of Beauvais, who died in 1264, and in the ‘Convertimini’, a
collection of moralized tales by the English Dominican Robert Holcot a
hundred years later. It is interesting to note however that nearly all
explorations of the political aspect of the analogy seem to be traceable
back to John of Salisbury, or even William of Conches, rather than to
Aesop. For example the Dominican John Bromyard, who died in 1352,
wrote in his *Summa Praedicantium*:

> God has ordained three classes of men, namely labourers such as
> husbandmen and craftsmen to support the whole body of the Church after
> the manner of feet, knights to defend it in the manner of hand, clergy to
> rule and lead it in the manner of eyes.

Thomas Brinton, Bishop of Rochester, told his listeners at a sermon he
gave in 1373:

> The heads are the kings, princes and prelates; the eyes are wise judges
> and true councillors, the ears are monks, the tongue fine preachers, the
> right hand is the soldiers ready to defend, the left hand is the merchants
> and faithful mechanics, the heart is the citizens and burghers placed in the
> middle position, the feet are the farmers and labourers supporting the
> whole body firmly.
Philippe de Mezières, who had travelled all over Europe trying to promote a new crusade against the Turks and finally retired to a monastery, further elaborated on the analogy in his Le Songe du Vieil Pelerin (‘The Dream of the Old Pilgrim’) of 1389: the head as king, throat and breast as princes and barons, stomach and entrails as treasurers and receivers, thighs as merchants, legs as artisans, feet as labourers, upper arms as grand officers of state, lower arms as knights and squires and, somewhat oddly, the backs of the hands as the servants attending on the person of the king. An anonymous English poem dating from the second decade of the Fifteenth Century compares the head to the king, mouth, nose, eyes and ears to counsellors, neck to judges, fingers to yeomen ‘with bent bows and bright swords’, legs to craftsmen, feet to ‘all true tillers of lands / that plough, and all that dig in clay / All the world stands on them’ and toes to ‘true servants’ and points out:

Toes helpheth man fro fal to ryse
He may not stande, that hath no toon . . .

(Toes enable a man to get up when he has fallen, he can’t stand up if he doesn’t have toes . . .) The poem goes on to tell the story of how the members rebuked the mouth (sic) for eating so much and made it desist for three days, with the usual results. On the continent Nicholas of Cusa, in his De Concordia Catholica, written for his fellow delegates at the Council of Basle some time between 1431 and 1433, compared the Pope to head, patriarch to eyes and ears, archbishop to hands, bishops to fingers, law to nerves, the commandments of God to arteries, decrees of church councils to veins, the Great Council of the Holy Roman Empire to stomach, judges to liver, nation (patris) to bones, and men, only briefly on earth, to flesh and suggested that social evils such as usury, fraud, cheating, theft, corresponding to Melancholy in the human individual, and war and dissension, corresponding to Choler, should be treated by doctors of the state, with cauterization and conserving medicines, resorting to amputation only when nothing else avails and there is ‘a danger of infection’. This latter notion, which was to be of enduring influence, probably derives from Pope Innocent III’s advice to Philippe II of France more than two centuries earlier with regard to heresy: ‘the wound that does not respond to the medicine of poultices should be excised with a blade.’

Sir John Fortescue, Lord Chief Justice of the Kings Bench in the time of Henry VI and his Lord Chancellor in exile during the 1460s, seems to have borrowed the idea of laws as nerves or sinews (nervi) from
Nicholas of Cusa in his treatise *De Laudibus Legum Anglie*, but he also seems to owe something to the tradition of Plato’s *Republic* in his claim that not just the physical but also the intellectual and spiritual parts of the human individual have their counterpart in the state:

a people wishing to erect itself into a kingdom or any other body politic must always set up one man for the government of all that body, who, by analogy with a kingdom, is, from ‘regendo’, usually called a king. As in this way the physical body grows out of the embryo, regulated by one head, so the kingdom issues from the people, and exists as a body mystical, governed by one man as head. And just as in the body natural, as Aristotle said, the heart is the source of life, having in itself the blood which it transmits to all the members thereof, whereby they are quickened and live, so in the body politic the will of the people is the source of life, having in it the blood, namely, political forethought for the interest of the people, which it transmits to the head and all the members of the body, by which the body is maintained and quickened.

The law, indeed, by which a group of men is made into a people, resembles the nerves of the body physical, for, just as the body is held together by the nerves, so this body mystical is bound together and united into one by the law, which is derived from the word ‘ligando’, and the members and bones of this body, which signify the solid basis of truth by which the community is sustained, preserve their rights through the law, as the body natural does through the nerves.

There is however a new element in this account: the body politic is presented as a dynamic, developing entity. The nearest Fortescue came to an explanation of how men come together to form a political community was the suggestion that the state grew out of smaller, fissiparous groupings:

For thus the kingdom of England blossomed forth into a dominion regal and political out of Brutus’s band of Trojans, which he led out of the territories of Italy and of the Greeks. And thus Scotland, which at one time was obedient thereto as a duchy, grew into a kingdom political and regal.

Nevertheless his comparison with the physical body growing from an embryo indicates that he sees the body politic as some sort of ongoing process, with the public interest, the common desires of the people that bring society together in the first place, as its life blood. The bones are the truth, the principles of probity and justice, which hold the body erect. Fortescue went on to say that, ‘just as the head of the body physical is unable to change its nerves, or to deny its members proper strength and due nourishment of blood, so a king who is head of the body politic is
unable to change the laws.’ This is an amplification of the claim of Henry de Bracton, a judge who had lived two centuries earlier, that the king was subject to God and the Law, ‘for the law makes him king. . . there is no king where will, and not law, rule.’ For Fortescue the permanent, unalterable features of a living body politic were not hierarchy and authority and the institutions through which power is exercised, but the principles of truth and legality which hold it together.9

Fortescue’s emphasis on legality probably owes as much to the circumstances in which he wrote as to his legal background. Edward IV, who had driven Fortescue’s royal master into exile, was a notably high-handed ruler. Since the Thirteenth Century periods of royal ascendancy tended to alternate in England with periods of ‘constitutionalism’ promoted by the great magnates of the country but mobilizing the grievances of a wider constituency as part of a campaign against an unsatisfactory king: Magna Carta, Parliament and Bracton’s doctrine that there was no king without law were bequests to future generations from an earlier ‘constitutional’ period. The House of Lancaster, which had come to the throne in 1399 by leading a reaction to Richard II’s despotism, had come near to restoring royal ascendancy through success in the renewed war with France, but was then left leaderless and rudderless by the accession of Henry VI, an infant king who grew up to be a weak adult further disabled by phases of psychiatric breakdown. The personal inadequacies of the king helped emphasize his role as an institution rather than as an individual: his overthrow by his cousin Edward IV, himself the archetype of the dynamic individual who shapes his own destiny, could not fail to focus attention on the issue of the proper relationship between ruler and state. A sub-text of De Laudibus Legum Anglie is that Henry VI’s title to the throne was better than Edward IV’s not on the grounds of superior legitimacy but on the grounds of superior civic virtue. Part of the originality of De Laudibus Legum Anglie is that, though Fortescue wrote in general terms, he was addressing the issues of the moment, rather than, like most other medieval exponents of the body-state analogy – the anonymous author of Rex Pacificus and Fortescue’s contemporary Nicholas of Cusa are rare exceptions – simply rehearsing an idea that owed its appeal to its having been handed down from the past.

Elsewhere, in his English-language tract The Difference between an Absolute and a Limited Monarchy, Fortescue made one of the first recorded uses of a word that in itself encapsulates the body politic idea. He wrote of how ‘Nembroth . . . made and incorpore the first realme.’ He
did not actually coin the term ‘incorporate’ for the coming together of men to form an institutional body, though indeed he may well have had a hand in drafting an Act of Parliament a few years earlier, ‘touchying the Corporation of the Toune of Plymmouth’ – but one may generally assume that words used in Acts of Parliament are ones that are already current in the language. The usage has no counterpart in Latin: *corpus* of course means ‘body’ in Latin; the verb *incorporare* means to fasten a marker on a body, pay money into the public treasury, perhaps to embody, but nothing relating to a corporation in the English meaning of the word; *corporatio* in Latin means one’s physical make-up, the assumption of a body, incarnation. Similarly the idea of the king or other ruler as ‘head’ may also have been somewhat alien to the Romans: they used their everyday word for head, *caput*, to refer to a ringleader or some sort of director of a spontaneous activity, but seem not to have applied it to persons holding official positions. It may be significant that though beheading was the Romans’ standard form of death penalty for citizens of the privileged classes, the word they used to describe the process did not refer to the head that was to be removed (as did for example the Greek term *apokephalizein*) but to the throat that was to be cut: *decollatio*. And when, with the decay of the Republic’s institutions, it became necessary to acknowledge that a single person was exercising permanent control of a government apparatus that had previously been directed by annually-appointed magistrates, the word that was adopted to describe this ruler was not ‘head’ but ‘first’, *princeps*, from which the word ‘prince’ derives. There is a mutual relationship between ideas and language: and the influence is not in only one direction.10

If words have a secret, unwritten history, so do the ideas they express. Some notions surface briefly in the surviving documentation and then fade from sight, such as the comparison of the three estates of the realm, King, Lords and Commons, to the Holy Trinity, made by the Speaker of the English House of Commons in 1401. Others are more durable, even if not permanently in view. In Chapter One the giant statue in Nebuchadnezzar’s dream was mentioned as a possible parallel to, or even derivative of, Plato’s notion of rulers having gold in their composition, soldiers silver, and farmers iron and bronze. Daniel’s explanation was that the different parts of the statues body referred to different stages of an empire’s history but one might well wonder why the striking image of a giant with a head of gold, chest and arms of silver, belly and thighs of bronze, legs of iron and feet mixed of iron and clay was not incorporated into the evolving analogy of body and state. In fact it
was. In 1413 Jean Gerson, Chancellor of the University of Paris, interpreted the statue’s golden head as representing the king and the royal family, the silver chest and arms as the ‘chevallerie’, the belly and thighs of brass, ‘a very resonant metal’, as the clergy in whom, similarly, ‘there should be a ring of truth’, and the iron of the legs and the mixed iron and clay of the feet as the bourgeoisie and peasants, ‘on account of their hard labour and humility in serving and obeying.’ It seems quite probable that a similar interpretation had been given in sermons in various parts of Europe at an earlier date. It is also probable that Gerson knew both John of Salisbury’s *Policraticus* and Christine de Pizan’s *Livre de Corps de Police*. Indeed, Gerson’s allusion to the role and function of the clergy, and the service provided by the legs and feet to those higher up, makes it seem very unlikely that he did not have some standard exposition of the body-state analogy in mind.\(^1\)

Again, since at least the Thirteenth Century there had been a tradition of comic texts depicting disputes between eye, ear, nose, tongue, hand, and foot that seemed to have nothing to do with political and social hierarchy or reflections on the organization of the body politic. The fables of Aesop always have a moral, and taken together their didactic purpose is unmistakeable. Taken each in isolation their ludicrous and grotesque elements become more obvious. A dispute between eye, ear, nose, tongue, hand and foot might be a Swiftian satire on the different parties in some political controversy but is more likely to come across as sheer fun at the expense of people who like to argue about nothing. The farcical element aspect is emphasized in a relatively late example, Giovan Giorgo Allone’s *La Comedia dei Cinque Sentimenti* (circa 1500 -1515) which is written in an extraordinary mixture of Lombard dialect and French: presumably it was comprehensible to its intended Milanese audience but they would have found even the language it was written in a joke. Yet even a text like *La Comedia dei Cinque Sentimenti* would help prepare people to recognize the aptness of a comparison of eye and hands with counsellors and soldiers. Just as texts of Aesop’s fables were much commoner than texts of *Policraticus* in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries, so orally transmitted variations on the theme of the Belly and the Members may have been much commoner than manuscript copies of Aesop’s fables. The influence of *Policraticus* may be seen in what other writers wrote: since few people in the Fifteenth Century had access to books, this is clearly not the whole story of the influence of the body-state analogy, even if it is the only part of the story we have.\(^1\)
CHAPTER THREE

THE SIXTEENTH AND SEVENTEENTH CENTURIES

‘By this time,’ wrote Milton at the end of the first book of his *History of Britain*,

like one who had set out on his way by night, and travail’d through a Region of smooth and idle Dreams, our History now arrivs on the Confines where day-light and truth meet us with a cleer dawn, representing to our view, though at far distance, true colours and shapes.

Similarly, we have come to the Sixteenth Century. We still do not know what people were saying, but with the spread of printing we at least have more certainty about what they were writing down. With printing the survival of texts becomes more likely, their precise dating easier, their possible connection – the genealogical descent of ideas they discuss – easier to trace.

The analogy between the body and the state had by now become something of a cliché. Thomas More wrote in 1518, ‘A kingdom in all its parts is like a man. . . . The king is the head; the people form the other parts. . .’ (But he was not at all happy when his royal master, in asserting his superiority to the Pope even in ecclesiastical matters, assumed the title of ‘Supreme Head’ of the Church of England.) A volume entitled *Certayne Sermons, or Homilies*, generally known as *The Book of Homilies*, issued by the English government in 1547 for use in churches stated, ‘the whole body of every realme, and al the membres & partes of the same, shal be subject to their hed, their kyng.’ There was no actual consensus as to which bodily organs corresponded with which organs of state. Thomas Starkey, in a manuscript presented to the king in 1535 or 1536 but not printed until the Nineteenth Century, thought that ‘the kyng, prince, and ruler of the state’ corresponded not to the head but to the heart, while ‘To the head, with the eyes, ears and other senses therein, resembled may be right well the under-officers by princes appointed, forasmuch as
they should ever observe and diligently wait for the weal of the rest of this body.' John Halle in 1565 only partly agreed, suggesting, 'Let us call the heart of a man a king, the brain and liver the chief governors under him.' When in 1588 in his *A Mervailous Combat of Contrarieties*, William Averell retold the fable of the Belly and Members in the form of a dialogue between Tongue, Hande, Foote, Belly and Back – 'Dear Brethren and fellow members, by what authoritie or right, rather with what boldnes, dare our Brethren the Belly and Back oppresse us, and so Lordlike commaund us' – he only introduced the Head at the end, after Hande and Foote acknowledge that they had been misled by the deceitful Tongue. Moreover Averell’s conclusion, that ‘as the head is by nature placed in the top of the body, so ought the Prince to have the highest roome over all causes in her common wealth and Country, being superior and supreame head of all others’, while following the party line that was officially enforced in Protestant England, was not at all the view current amongst Catholics overseas: at Paris Johannes Michaelis thought that farmers might not inaptly be compared to legs and thighs but that the clergy, not the prince, was the head. As late as 1611 John Donne could write in *An Anatomie of the World*:

The World contains
Princes for arms, and Counsailors for braines,
Lawyers for tongues, Divines for hearts and more,
The Rich for stomachs, and for backes the Poore;
The officers for hands, Merchants for feet
By which remote and distant Countries meet.

In any case the analogy of body and society was not the only simile that could be applied to the monarch’s role in the state. In 1603, after the union of the crowns of England and Scotland, James I told his first English Parliament:

What God hath conjoyned then, let no man separate. I am the Husband, and all the whole Isle is my lawfull Wife; I am the Head, and it is my Body; I am the Shepherd, and it is my flocke: I hope that no man will be so unreasonable as to thinke that I that am a Christian King under the Gospel, should be a Polygamist and husband to two wives; that I being the Head, should have a divided and monstrous Body; or that being the Sheapheard to so faire a Flocke (whose fold hath no wall to hedge it but the four Seas) should have my Flocke parted in two.²

As often happens, some of the successive rehearsals of the familiar tropes added new and interesting elements. Thomas Starkey,