

## A crisis of identity

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*Although I feel sympathy for people who feel they have been misled over the retention of organs without their knowledge, I also felt that the matter had not been handled well and that the public reaction was greater than it would have been 20 or 30 years ago. I raised the matter with Charles.*

**‘Charles, I’m sure there wouldn’t have been so much fuss about the retention of body parts if this had come to light 20 or 30 years ago. What d’you think?’**

‘I agree,’ he said.

**‘Why d’you think it is?’**

‘Well,’ he replied, ‘I think there are several reasons. First, it was a bad mistake to publish the results of a specific inquiry which found malpractice at the same time as the result of a general inquiry into the nature of past practice.’

**‘You mean that two separate issues got muddled in the public mind?’ I suggested.**

‘That’s exactly the point,’ he replied. ‘The Liverpool inquiry got it right. What was done was wrong, whether it was in 1960, 1980 or 2000, and the level of explicit consent expected was irrelevant to that conclusion. On the other hand, more “openness” has been demanded over the years as the culture has changed.’

**‘But don’t you think there’s more to it?’ I asked.**

‘Yes, these issues are and always have been difficult,’ he replied, ‘but I think the current reaction reflects profound changes in society. We have lost the concept of a human soul, or more widely, lost the metaphysical concept that a soul implies – the perception of an identity divorced from the physical manifestations of the object.’

**‘What d’you mean?’ I said.**

‘Take a primitive car constructed on a welded and bolted chassis, every part of which could be replaced independently. Is it the same car if I bash a wing and have it replaced?’

**‘Yes,’ I replied.**

‘Say in time I had to replace each individual part so that after 30 years no single part of the car is original. Would that be the same car?’

**‘That’s more difficult,’ I said, and after some hesitation added, ‘No.’**

‘Why do you say no?’ he asked.

**‘Because none of it is the same,’ I replied.**

‘But I’m sure you’d say that yours is the same body that you started with, even though it has grown and then changed shape, if I may say so! I understand that even in adult life very few of the molecules are the same as they were 30 or 40 years before. What’s the difference?’

**I was lost for an answer and replied lamely, ‘I suppose nuts and bolts are bigger than molecules, and it’s me.’**

‘It’s interesting that you hesitated over the answer to the question about the whole car but in the end gave the physical one, without recognising that your answer to the question about the wing was really the metaphysical one.’

**‘Go on.’**

‘Well,’ he said, ‘the strict physical answer to the first question is that it is not the same car but the car with a new wing, and to the second one that it is not the same car at all. The metaphysical answer is a straight yes on both counts.’

**‘What’s that got to do with human body parts?’ I asked.**

‘Let’s imagine your old Uncle Tom dies suddenly and his lungs are retained at post mortem,’ he said. ‘If you accept he has a soul, or indeed a metaphysical existence separate from the physical one, then there’s no problem if organs are taken at the post mortem and he is buried without them. The lungs become a relic rather than a part of old Uncle Tom. Of course one would like them to be treated with respect, but there is no need to bury them formally if they are no longer needed. The whole essence of Tom is already dead and buried so there is no reason to re-start the grieving process. If, on the other hand, you feel you’ve only buried part of old Uncle Tom, then one can understand the need for a second funeral and a second grieving.’

**‘But surely you still need expressed permission to keep old Tom’s lungs?’ I said.**

‘Well, that’s where things have also changed. Things will no longer be taken on trust to the same degree, and modern mores demand the right to give explicit rather than implicit permission.’

**‘Isn’t that a good thing?’ I asked.**

‘Not necessarily,’ he replied. ‘I think trust is important in human relationships, and when it abounds societies tend to be happier. I might be right or wrong in that, but by the same token I think that modern society should also accept that it might be right or wrong in its approach.’

**‘Are you suggesting that we should act in a way that seems right in our time, but not criticise the way things were handled in the past?’**

‘These changes might be seen as reflecting increasing openness or mistrust – and are probably a mixture of both. Either way it is arrogant for today’s individuals to judge past practice by today’s values. To apologise for what was done in the past in good faith is misguided. In reality it is pride masquerading as humility.’

*Coemgenus*