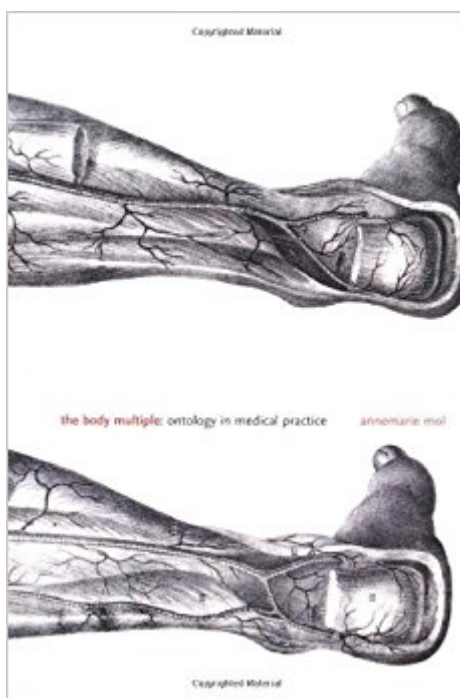


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The Body Multiple: Ontology In Medical Practice (Science And Cultural Theory)



Synopsis

The Body Multiple is an extraordinary ethnography of an ordinary disease. Drawing on fieldwork in a Dutch university hospital, Annemarie Mol looks at the day-to-day diagnosis and treatment of atherosclerosis. A patient information leaflet might describe atherosclerosis as the gradual obstruction of the arteries, but in hospital practice this one medical condition appears to be many other things. From one moment, place, apparatus, specialty, or treatment, to the next, a slightly different “atherosclerosis” is being discussed, measured, observed, or stripped away. This multiplicity does not imply fragmentation; instead, the disease is made to cohere through a range of tactics including transporting forms and files, making images, holding case conferences, and conducting doctor-patient conversations. The Body Multiple juxtaposes two distinct texts. Alongside Mol’s analysis of her ethnographic material—interviews with doctors and patients and observations of medical examinations, consultations, and operations—she runs a parallel text in which she reflects on the relevant literature. Mol draws on medical anthropology, sociology, feminist theory, philosophy, and science and technology studies to reframe such issues as the disease-illness distinction, subject-object relations, boundaries, difference, situatedness, and ontology. In dialogue with one another, Mol’s two texts meditate on the multiplicity of reality-in-practice. Presenting philosophical reflections on the body and medical practice through vivid storytelling, The Body Multiple will be important to those in medical anthropology, philosophy, and the social study of science, technology, and medicine.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

"The Body Multiple is a magnificent achievement. Annemarie Mol deftly reveals in compelling language how ontologies are not transcendent but are brought about in practice. Focusing on the body and disease, her ethnography of the manipulation of knowledge, and not the objects of knowledge, forces us to comprehend reality as multiple. This book will, without doubt, move the philosophy and anthropology of medicine to new heights." •Margaret Lock, McGill University

"The Body Multiple is compelling, wonderfully and sometimes slyly well-written, and full of innovative insights into actually existing medical practice." Mol's parallel text is well-placed intellectually in relation to her primary research text on atherosclerosis, and it provides a powerful teaching tool on how to think through and with science studies literatures when conducting an empirical project." •Rayna Rapp, New York University

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In "The Body Multiple: Ontology in Medical Practice", Annemarie Mol uses incidences of the disease atherosclerosis at a Dutch hospital to examine the manner in which doctors, patients, and the healthcare system construct different meanings of the body and disease. Mol writes, "This is a book about the way medicine enacts the objects of its concern and treatment." (pg. vii) In setting her book in the larger literature, Mol contributes "to theorizing medicine's ontological politics: a politics that has to do with the way in which problems are framed, bodies are shaped, and lives are pushed and pulled

into one shape or another. (pg. viii) Finally, her work “draws on a variety of literatures: in philosophy, anthropology, science and technology studies, feminist theory, sociology, political theory. (pg. ix) While the title refers to the body, Mol argues, “The body, the patient, the disease, the doctor, the technician, the technology: all of these are more than one. More than singular. (pg. 5) Bodies alternate between collections of organs and sentient people; doctors code switch depending on the task at hand and their audience; and even the technology varies depending on how a doctor, technician, or patient will use it and what they intend to derive from it. Mol writes, “In addition to disease, the object of biomedicine, something else is of importance too, a patient’s illness. Illness here stands for a patient’s interpretation of his or her disease, the feelings that accompany it, the life events it turns into. (pg. 9) This leads her to argue, “Atherosclerosis enacted is more than one but less than many. The body multiple is not fragmented. Even if it is multiple, it also hangs together. (pg. 55) Patients display different systems, visit the doctor with different complaints, require different treatments or tests, so that the disease and its treatment take on multiple forms. In one of her best examples of the way the body changes depending on the audience, Mol writes, “Surgeons do not see blood. Or they may see a lot of blood while they operate, but they try not to. They try to keep as much of it inside the vascular system as possible. Hematologists, on the other hand, don’t see patients. (pg. 110) Both may work with the same body, but it differs depending on their goals and perception. Mol draws upon the work of Barbara Duden who, in “The Woman Beneath the Skin,” approached the same concept through the lens of history. (pg. 25-26). The two books compliment each other, though I believe Duden’s was the more successful. Further, Mol moves her entire discussion of the secondary literature to a running sub-text along the bottom of each chapter. This prevents an organic reading wherein she could have referred back to it as necessary in the chapter itself.

This was recommended reading from a grad school teacher. I am NOT in the medical field at all, and yet I found her theories and approach to delineating her findings fascinating. The margins of my copy are now scribbled with the ideas her book brought to light for me. It’s a fascinating and unique approach to research. I highly recommend it for anyone interested in the intersection between ethnography and theory.

The complications of the traditional subject/object distinction that this book creates, while still

remaining a fairly easy-to-read text is impressive. It's unconventional structure I found helpful, actually.

This book has some interesting ideas but a tone that verges on patronising - the author seems to enjoy toying with the reader in a way that is slightly irritating after a while. The thesis around ontological multiplicity is suggestive, but not thoroughly enough developed or linked explicitly enough to ideas or scholars to which it is indebted. I was a bit disappointed.

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