

Defiant Afterlife–Disability and Uniting Ourselves to God

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We are not justified in affirming even of monstrosities, which are born and die, whomever quickly they may die, that they shall not rise again, nor that they shall rise again in their deformity, and not rather with an amended and perfected body.

Augustine, *Enchiridion*, chapter 87: “The Case of Monstrous Births”

Ableism is believing that heaven is an able-bodied place where broken bodies finally become whole.

Maria R. Palacios, “Naming Ableism”

Abstract

Many of the Church’s leading theologians have struggled with how individuals with disabilities could be perfectly united to God in the afterlife. For some, union with God requires that individuals with disabilities will have those disabilities ‘cures’ or ‘healed’ prior to heavenly union with God. Others have suggested that certain profound disabilities preclude an individual’s ability to have such union, thus suggesting, even if only implicitly, that such individuals have no eschatological place in the Body of Christ. In the present paper, I develop and consider an argument for the possibility of individuals retaining their disabilities in the eschaton and nevertheless enjoying complete union with God (and through God to others). I don’t think that the argument I develop here applies equally well to all disabilities; but I think it gives us reason to good to consider heavenly disability as part of a plausible speculative theology.

1 Introduction

Historically, the treatment of individuals with disabilities¹ by the Church has been mixed. Many Christians have evidenced a profound care of and concern for individuals with disabilities throughout much of the Church’s history; and there are certainly pockets of its history wherein aspects of the Church have evidenced not just personal but communal care and inclusion of those with disabilities. However, as with other kinds of social exclusions and problematic treatment of sub-populations (e.g., racism and sexism), large parts of the Church’s history with respect to individuals with disabilities call for lament and repentance rather than celebration.

In particular, many of the Church’s leading theologians have struggled with how individuals with disabilities could be perfectly united to God in the afterlife. For some, union with God requires that individuals with disabilities will have those disabilities removed prior to heavenly union with God. Others have suggested that certain profound disabilities preclude an individual’s ability to have such union, thus suggesting that such individuals have no eschatological place in the Body of Christ. In the present paper, I develop and consider an argument for the possibility of individuals retaining their disabilities in the eschaton and nevertheless enjoying complete union with God (and through God to others). I don’t think that the argument I develop is decisive, as it requires a number controversial claims that I here cannot argue for adequately in the present paper. Nor is this argument intended to necessarily applies equally well to all disabilities, in part because, as we’ll see in §4 below, I don’t think that there is a single thing as ‘disability’ that applies equally well in all contexts and neatly demarcates those individuals who do have disabilities from those that don’t. Nevertheless, I think that the argument developed here gives us reason to be open to the possibility of heavenly disability as part of a plausible speculative theology.

The present paper proceeds as follows. In §2 I briefly survey some of the problematic history of with respect to Christian theological reflection on disability, drawing out problematic assumptions about the value of individuals with disabilities, assumptions that have eschatological implications for those individuals. In section §3, I consider a number of recent treatments of the relationship between disability and eschatology by Terrence Ehrman, Amos Young, R. T. Mullins, and Richard Cross. Finally, in §4 I argue for the conclusion that at least some disabilities can be retained in the afterlife in a way that doesn’t

¹Below in §4, I indicate that I think there is no single concept which rightly captures the nature of a disability. It should not be surprising, then, that I cannot define what I mean by ‘disability’ here at the beginning of the paper. Elizabeth Barnes is suspicious that “there is a unified category . . . covering psychological, physical, and cognitive forms of disability simply because our word ‘disability’ can refer to physical, cognitive, or psychological disability” (Barnes (2015), 7; see also Berger (2013), 19). Barnes instead approaches disability as a “term introduced by ostension” (Barnes (2014), 89). I adopt a similar approach in my own work, including the present paper.

detract from the beatific vision of the redeemed. This argument will depend on a number of controversial assumptions about both disabilities and ancillary principles. Nevertheless, I think these assumptions are defensible, even if I don’t undertake their defense here. I then conclude that to the degree that we find these assumptions plausible, we have some reason to consider heavenly disability as part of a plausible speculative theology.

A brief word about my title before beginning. “Defiant Afterlife” is a riff on *Defiant Birth*, the title of a collection of stories from women who avoided the cultural pressure to abort their children with disabilities. Melinda Tankard Reist, the volume’s editor, describes the collection this way:

Defiant Birth is a book about women who have resisted the present day practice of medical eugenics. It is about women who were told they should not have babies because of perceived disabilities. . . . They have confronted a society deeply fearful of disability and all its stigma. Facing silent disapproval and even open hostility, they have had their babies anyway, believing their children are just as worthy to partake of life as are others. This is a book about women who have resisted the ideology of quality control and the paradigm of perfection. They have dared to challenge the prevailing medical and social mindset. This book’s contributors have refused to take part in a system of disability deselection.²

Just as that collection seeks to defiantly resist the claim that some humans shouldn’t be born because of their disabilities, the present paper seeks to resist the claim that having a disability is sufficient to preclude complete union with God in the afterlife. It seeks to push back against those strands of thought, often found within the Church, that individuals with various disabilities either cannot achieve union with God or can do so only after their disabilities are ‘cured’ or ‘healed’. That is, I argue that an individual’s having a disability does not necessarily preclude them from being full members of the heavenly banquet, and thus that we ought to concede the possibility of heavenly disability as part of a plausible speculative theology.

However, even if the present argument is successful, it neither shows that all disabilities are compatible with perfect union with God in the afterlife nor that there are no disabilities that will be cured. Given that I think there is reason to believe that there is no single concept or category which demarcates individuals who are disabled from those individuals that are not,³ this limitation in scope isn’t surprising. If there is no single thing that *is* disability, we should expect that different disabilities might relate to union with God in different ways.

²Reist (2006), 1. For testimony who hope for defiant resurrection, see Yong (2007), 268ff.

³See Timpe (forthcominga).

2 Historical Views on the Exclusion of Disability from the Afterlife

The goal of this section is to give a quick overview of some of the Christian tradition’s problematic history with respect to disability. In particular, I aim to highlight claims which suggest that disabilities must be healed for individuals to experience perfect union with God in the eschaton.⁴

2.1 Disability in Scripture

I begin this historical overview with the Christian canon. Even though it’s not a central theme, many of the Christian Scriptures contain a close connection between disability, on the one hand, and sin, impurity, or disobedience on the other.⁵ What it means to be whole or properly oriented to God frequently uses able-bodied imagery. In Leviticus, for instance, individuals with physical disabilities are prohibited from being priests due to being ‘defective’.⁶ Elisha punished the servant Gehazi with leprosy for his lack of faithfulness. Zechariah’s doubts about Gabriel’s promise of a child result in the angel disabling Zechariah by striking him mute. Spiritual failure and deceit is regularly associated with blindness, as is mental illness with demonic possession. The cultural connection between disability and impurity or sin is so strong that on being presented with a disabled individual, Jesus’ disciples asked “who sinned? This man or his parents?”⁷ And while Jesus attempted to alleviate the connection in this particular encounter, later parts of the New Testament continue to reinforce that very connection.⁸ Certainly the Scripture’s approach to disability, like with the Scripture’s approach to the value of women vis-a-viz men,⁹ is culturally conditioned. Nevertheless, much of the biblical witness fails to take a critical stance on the ableist assumptions and patterns inherited from its contexts, and those parts that do are often ignored in favor of the dominant able-bodied interpretation. Biblical scholar Sarah Melcher summarizes much of the New Testament’s

⁴According to Christian tradition, there are at least two eschatological options: heaven and hell. Given that my paper is concerned with union with God, it is only the relationship between the redeemed in heaven and disability that I consider here. The status of disability in hell (and, if one endorses such locations, purgatory and limbo) is not addressed.

⁵For relevant work, see, for instance, Olyan (2008) and Raphael (2008). Jeremy Schipper argues that Mephibosheth is the “only biblical character with a disability as a sustained character trait” (Schipper (2006), 3) in the Scriptures, specifically in II Samuel 4. In addition to the non-systematic approach to disability, another related difficulty in interpreting the Scriptural witness on disability is that biblical writers may have understood the nature of disability in a different way than we do now. See, for instance, Dewey and Miller (2017) for a discussion of this issue.

⁶Leviticus 21:16-24. However, as Helen Betenbaugh notes, “ironically, the same Bible which pronounces Levitical laws excluding persons with a lame foot from approaching the altar also commands us to act in compassion and with radical inclusiveness towards persons with disabilities” (Betenbaugh (1996), 52).

⁷John 9:2.

⁸For a related discussion, see Yong (2007), chapter 2.

⁹It’s worth noting here in the passing that disability is also associated women and other marginalized groups in parts of the Bible; see Olyan (2008).

approach as holding that “people with disability are implicitly or explicitly cast out of the kingdom of God.”¹⁰

Significant swaths of Church history have followed suit in making the same associations regarding disability.¹¹ In her introduction to Nancy Eiesland’s well-known *The Disabled God*, Rebecca Chopp argues that “most Christian traditions have equated disability with sin.”¹² During medieval Europe, mental illnesses or disabilities were regularly attributed to demon possess or sin. Individuals were sometimes imprisoned, tortured, or even executed as a result. Even if they were tolerated within a community, individuals with disabilities were seen as ‘lesser’ and often treated improperly. Pope Leo X, for instance, used individuals with disabilities as part of his dinner entertainment:

The Pope’s own dinners were noted for their rare delicacies . . . and for their jocularity, for such surprises as nightingales flying out of pies or little, naked children emerging from puddings. Buffoons and jesters were nearly always to be found at his table were the guests were encouraged to laugh at their antic and at the cruel jokes which were played on them—as when, for instance, some half-witted, hungry dwarf was see guzzling a plate of carrion covered in a strong sauce under the impression that he was being privileged to consume the finest fair.¹³

Now, this isn’t to say that such attitudes were ubiquitous. While many disabilities were seen as caused by sin, not all were. Reflecting on the medieval period, H. C. Erik Midelfort writes that “medieval and early modern thinkers regularly distinguished mental disorders [and disabilities] of organic origin from those based on moral, spiritual, or demonic influence.”¹⁴ Furthermore, during this same period Christian monasteries and nunneries across Europe ran hospices for the disabled and mentally ill, finding ways for them to be productive members of their local communities (even if the conditions those individuals lived and were cared for in would strike us as problematic). While I don’t want to deny the positive instances of care, many of which were significantly better than those that we find elsewhere in history, even a passing familiarity with this period leads us to the conclusion that the Church has failed to love, value, and care for individuals as it ought because of the presence of disabilities.¹⁵

¹⁰Melcher (2017), 21.

¹¹Two useful texts here are Brock and Swinton (2012) and Yong (2007), especially chapter 9.

¹²Eiesland (1994), 11. Though disability and mental illness are at times distinct, I think that there are some mental illnesses that are disabling. Anastasia Scrutton has done related work regarding the way that mental illness has also been moralized during much of the Church’s history. See, for instance, Scrutton (2015).

¹³As quoted in Scheerenberger (1983), 33f.

¹⁴Midelfort (1999), 19.

¹⁵Of course, this failure was not restricted just to individuals disabilities.

2.2 Luther

I turn then to a brief discussion of two theologians whose writings on disability reflect the problematic assumptions and associations represented in the previous section. A difficulty encountered here is that these figures didn’t address disability systematically; what they thought often has to be gleaned from passing comments or treatments focused on other topics. Furthermore, these two examples aren’t intended to be exhaustive.¹⁶ Nevertheless, these two examples should give sufficient context for thinking that the view that there will be disabilities in heaven is often associated with, and sometimes motivated by, problematic theological reflection on individuals with disabilities.

The Reformer Martin Luther stands as a notable theologian whose views about disability may strike us as problematic. Here I have in mind especially his claim in the *Tischreden* (usually translated as *Table Talk*). There, Luther suggests that a twelve-year-old boy from Dessau, who scholars think likely suffered from Prader-Willi Syndrome, ought to be drown. Interpreting the relevant passage is difficult, in part because there are three different versions of the *Tischreden* and it records notes of a conversation with Luther over dinner, rather than being written by Luther himself.¹⁷ However, all three versions contain the claim that ‘monstrosities’ are not human but merely animal.¹⁸ One version of the *Tischreden* suggests that Luther endorsed the view that rather than being human, the child was an offspring of the devil—a ‘changeling’.¹⁹ In what Stefan Heuser refers to as ‘the most trustworthy’ of the three versions of *Table Talk*, Luther writes:

I simply think he’s a mass of flesh without a soul. Couldn’t the devil have done this, inasmuch as he gives such shape to the body and the mind even of those who have reason that in their obsession they hear, see, and feel nothing?²⁰

In another version of the same incident, it appears that Luther denies that the boy should be baptized because he’s “only animal life.”²¹

¹⁶Augustine, for instance, used cognitive impairment as part of an argument for the existence of original sin: “Indeed, if nothing deserving punishment passes from parents to infants, who could bear to see the image of God, which is, you say, adorned with the gift of innocence, sometimes born feeble-minded, since this touches the soul itself” (*Against Julian*; 115).

¹⁷See, for instance, Goodey and Stainton (2001), 230.

¹⁸Miles (2001), 23.

¹⁹Changelings were “substituted for human children by fairies, trolls, witches, demons, or devils, [and] appeared frequently in the compilations of world folklore that have been a widespread genre” (Goodey and Stainton (2001), 223. This use of the term appears to date at least as far back as the early 11th century. The term ‘changeling’ was also used to refer to individuals with intellectual disabilities at least as far back as the middle of the sixteenth century and was part of Luther’s cultural and intellectual inheritance. The degree to which these two uses were intertwined is the subject of scholarly disagreement; but both uses seem to have anti-Semitic implicatures. See Goodey and Stainton (2001), 226f and Miles (2001), 16ff.

²⁰As quoted in Heuser (2012), 186f.

²¹*LW* 54:44-45, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012), 211.

Some scholars take this to indicate that Luther, like other in the Christian tradition, have equated disability with demon possession or connection with Satan, literally demonizing those with disabilities. Many in the disability rights community have latched onto this issue in particularly as evidence for just how deep ableist assumptions and stereotypes are in the Christian tradition. Stefan Heuser writes that "Luther's suggestion that the disabled boy be killed appears symptomatic not only of a medieval superstition but of beliefs that are very much alive in contemporary responses to disability... Such a conclusion [regarding the boy] is paradigmatic of any discourse that rests on the separation of 'the disabled' from 'the normal'." ²²

Other scholars push back on the connection here. C. F. Goodey and Tim Stainton argue that Luther's comment "has been grossly overinterpreted." ²³ And even Heuser himself admits that "Luther's comments on changelings operate within a discourse seeking to distinguish between human beings and devil's children, not between 'normal' and 'disabled' human beings ... as in the modern disability discourse." ²⁴

It must also be admitted that there are conflicting strands within Luther's thought on disability. Elsewhere he's clear that other kinds of disabling conditions are a natural part of human earthly life and writes that "even if one member of the body has a defect, the entire person is still endowed with body and soul, shows forth nothing but God's goodness." ²⁵ He also explicitly states that "the deaf and the dumb [so long as they are rational] ... deserve the same things that we do" and thus should be given the sacraments of baptism and eucharist. He holds that that deaf or blind individuals should be allowed to marry and that they may have more faith than many able-bodied individuals. ²⁶

Finally, Luther also refers to all "dangerous diseases [as] blows of the devil." ²⁷ And there is reason to think that Luther had a long-term personal relationship with an individual with a disability who served as his personal assistant for over 25 years. ²⁸

So the kind of sentiment that the *Tischreden* evidences isn't a main thrust of his moral theology. While this may be the case, that doesn't mean that Luther's reaction, if accurately recorded in this text, isn't problematic. In fact, even if Luther thought that the child wasn't a changeling but merely a non-

²²Heuser (2012), 186f.

²³Goodey and Stainton (2001), 225; see also Miles (2001), 30ff.

²⁴Heuser (2012), 187. See also Miles (2001).

²⁵*LW* 24:73-74, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012), 213f. Luther elsewhere does reinforce the New Testament's use of blindness and other disabilities as indicative of spiritual malady; see *LW* 35:110-11, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012), 206f; and *LW* 51:35-43, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012).

²⁶See Miles (2001), 26.

²⁷*LW* 54.53.360.

²⁸See Miles (2001), 27.

human animal,²⁹ this indicates a dehumanization and devaluing that we ought to object to. Luther’s insistence elsewhere in his theology that the devil is one of “God’s [providential] decree and punishment” further problematizes the connection here.³⁰ And Luther’s thoughts on the boy from Dessau isn’t the only problematic understanding of disability that Luther had. He suggests a number of times, for instance, that pregnant women can cause their children to be born with disabilities or deformities by becoming too scared.³¹

2.3 Calvin

The Reformer John Calvin is another influential theologian who problematically understands disability within his theology. Given Calvin’s approach to biblical theology, he accepts—apparently consistently and uncritically—the connection between sin and disability mentioned earlier. And there are further problems as well.

We shouldn’t be surprised that we don’t find a specific theological discussion of disability and the eschaton in Calvin given his general opposition to theological speculation,³² which he rejected in favor of biblical theology. He explicitly warns of the dangers of speculative theology regarding matters eschatological. As he writes in the *Institutes*,

Here, indeed, if anywhere in the secret mysteries of scripture, we ought to play the philosopher soberly and with great moderation; let us use great caution that neither our thoughts nor our speech go beyond the limits to which the Word of God itself extends.³³

And elsewhere:

We also feel how we are titillated by an immoderate desire to know more than is lawful. From this, trifling and harmful questions repeatedly flow forth—trifling, I say, for from them no profit can be derived. But this second kind is worse because those who indulge in them entangle themselves in dangerous speculations; accordingly, I call these questions ‘harmful.’³⁴

In fact, Calvin specifically mentions the nature of the resurrected body as one of the theological topics about which we ought not speculate³⁵ even though he

²⁹However, there are other places where Luther endorses changeling mythology. See for instance his second commentary on Galatians; *LW* 16: 190.

³⁰*LW* 43: 124-27, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012), 209f; see also Heuser (2012), 188. Granted, Luther also suggests that the bodily spasms of orgasm and those that result from epilepsy are both the result of sin. See *LW* 1:118-19, reprinted in Brock and Swinton (2012), 2013.

³¹See Miles (2001), 29.

³²And to philosophy as well.

³³*Institutes*, 1.13.21.

³⁴*Institutes*, I.4.

³⁵Look closely at *Institutes* 3.25.7.

was clear that the the resurrection requires numeric identity between the present and resurrected bodies.³⁶

A particularly problematic part of Calvin’s theology with respect to disability is his view that the sacrament of the Eucharist ought to be restricted to those who were sufficiently ‘well enough instructed’ and could recite the catechism, thereby excluding individuals with intellectual disabilities.³⁷ For Calvin, one of the defining characteristics of human nature is rationality; it’s largely human rationality that distinguishes us from ‘mere beasts’ and is part of what the *imago dei* consists in.³⁸ Calvin is clear that all, especially fallen, humans have intellectual and cognitive limitations, limitations which are furthered impacted by the noetic effects of sin.³⁹ However,

he [Calvin] fails to reflect on the genuine diversity of human intellect, seeming instead to assume that we all share similar degrees of pride, vanity, and cognitive capacity. This is an example of a recurring and problematic theme throughout Calvin’s work, where he simultaneously appears to value and equalize all people (we have all fallen and yet all have sacred worth) and yet (intentionally or not) does not truly include all people in this vision, particularly those who differ from his expectation of normal rationality or intellectual capacity.⁴⁰

The fact that individuals with intellectual impairment ought to be denied the Eucharist is especially problematic given Calvin’s view of the centrality of that

³⁶Calvin himself suffered from chronic health problems, which he looked forward to being removed from body in the resurrection: “I hear . . . that you are weak in body and afflicted with many diseases, of which I too have my share to exercise me in the same manner. But however that may be, we have great cause to be satisfied that in our languishing we are supported by the strength of God’s Spirit, and moreover, that if this corruptible tabernacle is falling to decay, we know that we shall be very soon restored, once and forever” (*Select Works of John Calvin*, vol 7, *Letters* 4, 333).

³⁷Whether those who are unable to speak should also be denied the Eucharist is unclear. It’s plausible, however, that Calvin, like others in the 16th century, would have interpreted individuals unable to speak as having cognitive impairment, even if they had none. Given his endorsement of infant baptism, Calvin likely would have been fine with baptizing those individuals, whether infant or not, who had cognitive impairments.

³⁸It’s not clear to me that Calvin would explicitly say that individuals with severe cognitive disabilities fail to be human or fail to be created in the *imago dei*. One option, which Richard Cross finds in Aquinas, is to say that all humans have the requisite reasoning abilities, but those with disabilities are prevented from exercising them by some bodily condition. See Cross (2012), 424f.

³⁹“Reason, though weak and immersed in darkness, was not totally destroyed by the Fall” (*Institutes* I.233.) but he still was reasonably optimistic both about the possibility of human reason: “It is that every individual understands how human societies must be regulated by laws, and also is able to comprehend the principles of those laws. . . . No man is devoid of the light of reason” (*Institutes* I.234. For an extended discussion of Calvin’s view on human reason, see Nixon (1963). Nixon concludes that “contrary to popular opinion, Calvin overemphasized the abilities of human reason . . . [and] underemphasized the limits of human reason” (Nixon (1963), 126f). For an excellent contemporary discussion of the noetic effects of sin, see Westphal (1990).

⁴⁰Creamer (2012), 221.

sacrament to the Christian life. For Calvin, the Christian life (whether individual or communal) “cannot be said to be well ordered and regulated unless in it the Holy Supper of our Lord is always being celebrated and frequented.”⁴¹ The Eucharist is a way—perhaps even the paradigmatic way—of binding ourselves with Christ, and through Him with other members of the Church in ecclesial unity. According to J. Todd Billings, Calvin’s “strongest of language of participation [of humanity in the goodness of God] relates to the sacraments. . . . Through the sacraments believers truly participate in Christ; they do not simply imitate Christ or partake of his benefits.”⁴² Here theologian John Hull worries that the required participation in the Eucharist and the high demand on human rationality that requires suggests an ableist limitation on participation in the life of Christ. “It has often been thought that the image of God is to be found in human reason, but this is not acceptable to a disability theology since people with severe intellectual disabilities would be excluded from being in the divine image.”⁴³ Furthermore, if the kind of union required for the Beatific Vision comes through the Eucharist, then Calvin may have thought that those with such disabilities are not capable of such union.⁴⁴

These two parts of Calvin’s theology suggests that he valued at least some intellectually disabled humans less than non-disabled humans. Though he has medieval theologians in mind here and not Calvin, Richard Cross’s claim that those views which “[seem] to put those who lack reason in the place of second-class citizens in the community of the church,”⁴⁵ and are thus problematic seems to apply to Calvin’s view as well.

2.4 Historical Implications

While the above discussion has been cursory, both in terms of its look at Scripture and engaging the breadth of historical theology, the problematic nature of at least some Christian theology regarding disability should be sufficiently clear. Summarizing the Biblical witness, Jamie Clark-Soles writes that “linking sin with impairment can be a dangerous, destructive habit. A connection may be possible in particular cases, but such is not inevitable. Similarly, tying salvation and forgiveness of sins to a ‘cure’ is also problematic.”⁴⁶ It is this connection which has lead so much of the Christian tradition to believe that those with disabilities need to be made whole prior to perfect union with God in the afterlife. Similarly, in her influential book *The Disabled God*, Nancy Eiesland claims that this history shapes how individuals with disabilities continue to be excluded by

⁴¹Calvin, “Articles concerning the Organization of the Church and of Worship at Geneva proposed by the Ministers at the Council, January 16, 1537”, in *Calvin: Theological Treatises*, 48.

⁴²Billings (2005), 323f.

⁴³Hull (2014), 82.

⁴⁴It’s also possible that he thought such individuals would achieve this union with God in the eschaton, even though they’re not able to achieve its foretaste in the present life.

⁴⁵Cross (2012), 427.

⁴⁶Clark-Soles (2017), 344.

the Christian community:

Three themes—sin and disability conflation, virtuous suffering, and segregationist charity—illustrate the theological obstacles encountered by people with disabilities who seek inclusion and justice within the Christian community. It cannot be denied that the biblical record and Christian theology have often been dangerous for persons with disabilities.⁴⁷

I think that the Church can, and should, do better.

3 Contemporary Arguments

While much Christian reflection on disability reflects these problematic assumptions, a number of contemporary theologians and philosophers have recently explored other option on the nature of disability and its relationship to the Christian doctrine of the resurrection. For purposes of time, this section does not seek to be exhaustive, but rather aims to show the range of thought in recent philosophical reflection. In the final section of the paper, I develop an argument for the existence of at least some disabilities in the eschaton, offered as a mediating position between those I canvas here.

3.1 Ehrman

I begin with a recent argument by Terrance Ehrman for the claim that disabilities may be healed eschatologically. On its own assumptions, I think the argument is largely successful: Ehrman shows how it can be that some disabilities are healed in the resurrection.⁴⁸ But as I’ll argue, it’s one thing to argue that disabilities *can* be healed eschatologically and quite another to argue that disabilities *will* be healed eschatologically. It’s an even further claim to argue that a disability *must* be healed eschatologically for there to be perfect union with God. And even if that could be established, it’s an even stronger claim that *all* disabilities must be healed eschatologically. I think that Ehrman fails

⁴⁷Eiesland (1994), 74.

⁴⁸It is clear that Ehrman offers this argument as tentative and not settled: “theological humility should characterized discussion about the resurrection body” since such speculative theology involves “learned ignorance” (Ehrman (2015), 733). I grant him the need for theological humility, but (unlike a number of theologians and philosophers of religion) I don’t think the need for such humility rules out an appropriate role for speculative theology. For instance, in Timpe (2015) I argue that a particular account of limbo is worth consideration as part of speculative theology, motivated in part by considerations related to disability.

It should also be noted that while Ehrman refers to people with disabilities as being “defective” (Ehrman (2015), 731), he says he intends this term in a metaphysical rather than evaluative (or moral) way, given the privation view of evil and the metaphysics of natures that he’s working with. In passing, he also makes the claim that hermaphrodites are defective for the same reason (Ehrman (2015), 731). Nothing in my paper should be seen as attempting to address intersex individuals. For an interesting paper on intersexed bodies and the resurrection, see Merrick (2011).

to establish the claim that disability must be healed eschatologically, and thus fails also with regard the strongest of these claims that all disabilities must be healed eschatologically. Given this, and given the kind of ableist devaluing of individuals with disabilities that mark earlier views that seem to share Ehrman’s conclusion, we have a motivation to explore arguments for the possibility of individuals retaining their disabilities in the eschaton. I shall consider this possibility in §4.

Ehrman claims to show “that Thomistic hylomorphic anthropology provides the best context to understand the human person such that disability is not essential to identity.”⁴⁹ But if this is goal, his argument comes up short. Ehrman thinks that Thomistic hylomorphic anthropology is better than a number of emergentism materialistic views of human nature.⁵⁰ But I don’t think he successfully shows hylomorphic dualism human nature to be better than these other views, in part because proponents of these views have responses to his criticisms that he doesn’t consider. Furthermore, there are competitor views that he doesn’t engage at all. So, as an attempt to show his preferred anthropology is best, his efforts come up short. Fortunately, for present purposes we can sidestep this part of his article, since I don’t think any of what will follow about disability in the eschaton depends on settling the question of human nature.⁵¹

For Ehrman, the Christian doctrines of resurrection and the subsequent union with God in beatitude for the redeemed require numeric identity between the resurrected person and the earthy person with disabilities. I agree.⁵² But so far as I can tell, no one in the relevant literature disputes this. Rather, the question is about the relationship between an individual’s disability and numeric identity. Ehrman is arguing against a number of theologians of disability⁵³ who suggest that disability is part of an individual’s identity. It’s sometimes not clear how to take these theological claims, in part because some theologians don’t clearly differentiate between numeric and the relevant sort of qualitative identity.⁵⁴ Ehrman takes them to be making a claim about numeric identity: “The authors presume disability is integral to identity because it is divinely bestowed. A person with a disability cannot be the same person, and thus numerically identity [sic.] is absent, ‘if the primary theological story we tell about him requires that he be changed into something different when he dies. . . .’ Healing

⁴⁹Ehrman (2015), 723.

⁵⁰He specifically argues against the views of Nancy Murphy, William Hasker, Kevin Corcoran, and Stewart Goetz.

⁵¹I’m willing to grant that Ehrman, on the assumption that his preferred anthropology is correct, has an account of resurrection identity in which a person’s earthly disability wouldn’t be essential to their identity. But, as shall be made clearer below, I don’t think that this settles the question regarding if there will be disabilities in heaven.

⁵²See Baker (2009), especially 453.

⁵³For instance, Yong (2007). More on Yong’s view in §3.2 below.

⁵⁴This problem can be found in Swinton (2012) and Swinton et al. (2011), despite other virtues of these works.

of a disability for these authors eliminates identity."⁵⁵ Ehrman thinks that the requirement for numeric identity in the resurrection doesn't require qualitative identity: "The numerically identical person who lived and died is also raised by God's power and love. This does not entail that qualitative identity remains the same... Could we not imagine the divine resurrected healing of a sibling with Down syndrome that does not destroy her identity?"⁵⁶ Whether we can imagine such a situation depends on the relationship between imaginability (or conceivability) and possibility, whether such a healing is in fact possible, and the robustness of our imaginations when it comes to disability. While I don't want to deny that it is possible that a person with Down syndrome is 'healed' of this condition in the afterlife, the possibility is assumed rather than established by Ehrman's rhetorical question.

Earlier in the article, Ehrman claims that because disability is merely permitted by God and not caused by Him directly, a disability is an accidental feature of the individual who has it. And as an accidental feature, it doesn't impact the person's humanity or value.⁵⁷ Given that healings from some disabilities happen in the present life without undermining personal identity, I take Scripture to establish that sometimes disability can be healed. Here, I agree with Ehrman: "Divine healing on earth does not eliminate identity, and numerical identity is not challenged by divine healing in the resurrection. But the question now centers on whether healing and disabilities will take place in the resurrection."⁵⁸ More specifically, the question now centers on if heavenly 'cure' or 'healing' should be hoped for in all cases. And here Ehrman's argument is lacking.

Granting Ehrman all his (broadly Thomistic) assumptions for present purposes, he may have shown how disabilities can be healed in the resurrection prior to the eschaton "because they are not inherent to our identity."⁵⁹ But to show that the eschaton *can* involve the actualization of a certain possibility doesn't establish that it *must* for the beatific vision to be achieved. It's possible that I'll have long flowing locks in the eschaton and that my face will shine with

⁵⁵Ehrman (2015), 725; quoting Swinton et al. (2011), 9. Ehrman makes the same claim about Nancy Eiesland's statement: "having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God" (Eiesland (2001-2002), 2). But notice that that quotation says nothing about numeric identity, and only has implications for numeric identity if certain controversial assumptions about personal identity over time are made. A theologian who is at least sometimes careful about personal identity, on the one hand, and qualitative or self-understanding forms of identity, on the other, is Amos Yong. However, it seems to me that in some places (for example, Yong (2009), 69), Yong sometimes slides between numeric and self-understanding forms of identity.

⁵⁶Ehrman (2015), 734.

⁵⁷"Those who have physical and/or mental impairments and disabilities are no less human persons, rather the impairments and disabilities are frustrated capacities and not indicative of a qualitatively different nature" (Ehrman (2015), 732) As with the claim about the resurrection requiring numeric identity, so far as I can tell, no one involved in the debate disagrees with the claim about individuals with disabilities having a lesser value. This is true even though examples drawn from history or the theological survey of §1 above do include such a claim.

⁵⁸Ehrman (2015), 736). For a related discussion, see Hull (2014), 87ff.

⁵⁹Ehrman (2015), 737.

the glory of a Tim Pawl-esque beard. But of course it doesn’t follow from this possibility that I *will* have such follicled glory, much less that I *must* have such for beatitude and perfect union with God.⁶⁰

3.2 Yong and Mullins

A recent exchange between Amos Yong and R.T. Mullins picks upon the issue of identity and disability in the eschaton. At the heart of their at times acerbic exchange is what Mullins refers to as ‘Stanley Hauerwas’s dictum’: “To eliminate the disability means to eliminate the subject.”⁶¹ Mullins notes that Hauerwas himself doesn’t argue for this claim, but “simply asserts this, without justification, as a passing comment. In plays no role in the argument of his paper.”⁶² If this dictum is correct, then union with God in the afterlife would require that disabilities remain given that it will be the very same person who has a disability in this life that is united with God in the next. Mullins raises a number of problematic consequences from accepting Hauerwas’ dictum.⁶³ Most importantly for present purposes, Mullins doesn’t just think it has problematic implications, he thinks it is false. As a result, he suggests that Yong ought to reject the claim that “disabilities must be retained in the resurrection in order to preserve identity and continuity.”⁶⁴

According to Mullins, “Yong has a case of mistaken identity. By this I mean that he has confused metaphysical identity with a sense of self. Further, he has confused the ‘is’ of predication with the ‘is of identity.”⁶⁵ Mullins thinks that a person having a particular disability is a contingent state of affairs, and thus any disability is merely an accidental property rather than an essential property. It’s odd to claim Yong holds all disabilities are part of one’s personal identity, given that he is clear about the existence of acquired disabilities (for example, losing a leg in war), as well as the possibility that some disabilities are healed.

In a reply to Mullins’ criticism, Yong claims that Mullins’ article is “misleading”⁶⁶ on a number of points regarding Yong’s view, including taking Yong’s view to require commitment to Hauerwas’s dictum as a necessary truth.⁶⁷ Sec-

⁶⁰There’s a potential parallel with gender that is worth exploring at another time. If an individual’s gender is taken to be an accidental feature of a person’s identity, then it may be that a person could have a different gender in the eschaton. But this mere possibility doesn’t entail that all persons united with God in the beatific vision will have a gender different than they presently have.

⁶¹Mullins (2011), 26, quoting Hauerwas (1984), 69.

⁶²Mullins (2011), 26 footnote 8.

⁶³See Mullins (2011), section 3.

⁶⁴Mullins (2011), 31.

⁶⁵Mullins (2011), 27.

⁶⁶Yong (2012), 4 note 2.

⁶⁷So far as I can tell, there’s no reason at all to think that Yong is committed to Hauerwas’s dictum as a necessary truth. Perhaps one could argue that claims about identity are all necessary claims about identity. But nobody here does that. Furthermore, as I detail below,

ond, consider Yong’s 2009 article that Mullins is primarily responding to:

The answer [regarding disability and the problem of evil] cannot be simply saying that God will in the end ‘heal’ such individuals of their genetic variation, as it is difficult to imagine how someone with trisomy-21 (for example) can be the same person without that chromosomal configuration. In these cases, for God not to allow the trisomic mutation may be for God not to allow the appearance of precisely that person. There may be no way, in this case, to eradicate the disability without eliminating the person.⁶⁸

Here, Yong is talking about the healing of disabilities in the eschaton. But notice the tentativeness of his discussion. Yong is making claims about what *may* be the case.⁶⁹ In this article, Yong doesn’t argue for the truth of Hauerwas’s dictum. He just highlights dangers of taking all instances of disability to involve healing, dangers related to the discussion in §2 above. “If we think that the afterlife is a ‘magical’ fix to all the challenges imposed by disability, then we may be more inclined to simply encourage people with disabilities (as has long been done) to bear up under their lot and await God’s eschatological healing for their lives.”⁷⁰

Even in his earlier book on the subject, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, Yong doesn’t argue for the claim that disability is always integral to personal identity in the way suggested by Hauerwas’s dictum. Rather he seeks to take the testimony of those who say it is seriously, and see if it can be accommodated. “My point is simply to show that disability perspectives raise probing questions about traditional eschatological articulations concerning the heavenly hope and the resurrection of the body. If they are to survive the interrogations informed by the experience of disability, our eschatological and theological visions *may* need reformulated.”⁷¹ Continuing along these lines:

Yong doesn’t even seem committed to it being true. The closest I can find where Yong says anything that might require commitment to Hauerwas’s dictum is as follows: “Greggory [of Nyssa]’s dynamic eschatology illuminates how disability will be transformed even if its particular scars and marks will be redeemed and not eliminated” (Yong (2007), 281). As I indicate below, I think Yong isn’t committed to the truth of Hauerwas’s dictum. And if he’s not, then it follows that he’s not committed to it being necessarily true.

⁶⁸Yong (2009), 61.

⁶⁹It’s not clear if Yong is making a claim about epistemic or logical possibility, but I don’t think anything hangs on which he intends here.

⁷⁰Yong (2009), 70.

⁷¹Yong (2007), 270f, emphasis added. Paying careful attention to the testimony of individuals with disabilities, Yong writes: “The hope of people with disabilities in general, then, is dominated by visions of an afterlife in which the challenges associated with their conditions will be no more” (Yong (2009), 67). But there are at least two ways this could be accomplished: ‘healing’ or change to community. Yong clearly endorses the latter through a “a robust theology of social reconciliation” including the perfection of human relationships with each other and ending of all oppressive, discriminatory, or unjust social relations in “God’s redemption of the interpersonal, social, and environmental structures of Creation itself” (Yong (2007), 285f.). Given my focus in the present paper, I won’t focus on this latter element but want to register my endorsement of it.

I further speculate that people with intellectual or developmental disabilities, such as, those with Down Syndrome or triplicate chromosome 21—will also retain their phenotypical features in their resurrection bodies. There will be sufficient continuity to ensure recognizability as well as self-identity. Thus, the redemption of those with Down Syndrome, for example, would consist not in some magical fix of the twenty-first chromosome but in the recognition of their central roles both in the communion of saints and in the divine scheme of things.⁷²

The first claim here is primarily about the phenotypical features of bodies and their role in the beatific vision. And the second part of this quotation is about self-understanding or self-identity. Yong continues that for all persons, not just those with disabilities, “so also will the resurrected body be the site through which the meaning of our narratives are transformed (and thus eternally).”⁷³ Furthermore, Yong cites positively Jerry Wall’s claim that resurrected bodies will be ‘healed’, even of disability.⁷⁴

So it’s just not the case that Yong is committed to the truth of Hauerwas’s dictum in the way that Mullins suggests.⁷⁵ I agree that there is reason to think that Hauerwas’s dictum is false, since it can’t be true if there is any person such that they have a disability at one time and lack that disability at another. As already indicated, there are such people, namely those with acquired or temporary disabilities. Furthermore, what’s important for this paper’s purpose is that rejecting Hauerwas’s dictum doesn’t entail that there won’t be any disabilities in heaven.

If having a particular disability is an accidental rather than essential property of the person who has that disability, then it is possible that the person be resurrected without having that property and yet not have their personal identity endangered. Mullins is right about this conditional. But note that not all accidental properties must be lost in the resurrection. For instance, consider the

⁷²Yong (2007), 282. See also Yong (2012), 5.

⁷³Yong (2007), 283.

⁷⁴Here is Walls: “Given that heaven is a place of perfect wholeness and happiness, it is surely reasonable to believe that defects of mind and body will be repaired. Physical deformities, diseases, maiming, crippling, mental deficiencies, and the like obviously represent obstacles to human satisfaction in the fullest sense of the world. . . . This is not to deny that such defects will continue as a part of human identity. Those who negotiated this life with the additional struggles of mental or physical deformities will retain the memories of doing so as well as the positive character traits they formed as a result” (Walls (2002), 112). Note that Wall’s is here claiming, and which Yong indicates agreement with, is the following: (a) that the resurrection body will be numerically identical with the present body; (b) that the memories, experiences, and character traits that shape an individual’s self-understanding will be retained, and (c) that at least some disabilities will be healed. And Yong claims that Walls is correct about (3).

⁷⁵Mullins does admit that there is an ambiguity in Yong’s work about whether Hauerwas’ dictum is true, Mullins (2011), 26 footnote 9.

following properties: *the property of being Jameson’s, Emmaline’s, and Magdalen’s father* or *the property of being the co-author that Tim Pawl attributes his Christological errors to*. I currently have both of these properties. But nothing in the resurrection requires that I cease to be my children’s parent or the locus of Pawl’s diverting blame simply because those properties aren’t essential to my personal identity.

3.3 Cross

Whereas Ehrman tries to argue that there will be no disabilities in heaven because they will all be cured, Richard Cross explores the possibility that part of what it means to be human is to be disabled. Much of Cross’s discussion focuses on medieval accounts (particular those of Thomas Aquinas, Hervaeus Natalis, and John Duns Scotus) of the Incarnation, according to which the second person of the Trinity assumes a full human nature. This one person is both fully God and fully human. Many of the details, especially the historical interpretive details, of Cross’s argument can be set aside for present purposes.⁷⁶

Drawing on Scotus, Cross suggests that the instrumentality relation can sometimes provide for a union between a person and an instrument, such as a prosthetic limb:

I shall assume that this kind of unity—satisfied *merely* by relations of efficient causation—obtains between a person and an external tool or (in effect) a prosthetic limb. But I shall assume too that this unity is just as strong as obtains between a substance and an intrinsic part (e.g. a limb united to its whole by some kind of relation of formal causality). The only significant different is that external tools and prostheses are in principle easier to detach and attach than intrinsic parts are (compare a knife with an arm-blade).⁷⁷

If this kind of unity is possible, then Cross suggests that in the Incarnation the assumed human nature becomes a “total prosthesis”⁷⁸ of the Incarnate second person of the Trinity, where a total prosthesis performs “*all* human vital functions for a person, and [is] the instrument of that person in all human causal activity in the world.”⁷⁹

While the Incarnational theology here is provocative, that’s not the aspect of Cross’s view that is relevant for the present paper. Rather, what I want to focus on here is *if* Cross’s suggestion for understanding the Incarnation is correct,

⁷⁶Though I’d encourage y’all to read it; it’s a great paper.

⁷⁷Cross (2011), 645. If Cross is correct, then the kinds of scaffolding for agency that I discuss in other places might actually be part of the individual’s agency, even though I don’t intend my argument there to make that connection. See Timpe (forthcomingb).

⁷⁸Cross (2011), 646.

⁷⁹Cross (2011), 650.

what follows for how we might understand disability in the eschaton. For Cross, the implications here aren’t hard to see:

On this view, the model or archetype of human personhood is something that is *dependent* in various ways on some kind of prosthesis... Given that the incarnate divine person is the normative case of what it is to be a human person, the incarnation shows that persons, *normatively*, are substances that include and depend on prostheses. Putting it another way, we might say that, normatively, human persons are intrinsically disabled or impaired.⁸⁰

In a footnote later in the paper, Cross clarifies:

I distinguish impairment and disability below... As I make clear there, in line with suggestions made in my introduction, above, impairment is dependence; disability is the failure of the environment—be it the physical environment or the activities of other human agents—to provide the conditions for provide [sic.] for opportunities for dependence necessary for flourishing. So, strictly speaking, human persons are intrinsically impaired, but not disabled.⁸¹

What I refer to in this paper with the term ‘disability’ aligns, at least in some cases, more closely with Cross’s use of ‘impairment’ than with what he refers to as ‘disability’. It will be important to keep the terminology straight. If all humans are intrinsically impaired, it follows from the goodness of God that impairment (again on Cross’s use of that term) is a good thing, thus undercutting the kinds of negative assessments we saw above in §2. More specifically, the goodness here is related to our mutual interdependence and the kind of community intended for humans.⁸²

Whether or not this view of view of human nature and its relationship to impairment ultimately holds up will depend on other philosophical commitments regarding human nature, the substantial unity, etc... I won’t take a stand on issue on these issues here, primarily because I don’t need to. (Here I’m reminded of the following advice: one ought not climb out on every metaphysical limb.) But the upshot of the view Cross develops for the present paper is as follows. If, as Cross suggests, part of what it means to be human is to be impaired, then insofar as we remain humans in our eschatological union with God in the afterlife, we’ll be impaired there. It’s just that heaven will be such that it will “provide an environment suitable for people with impairments to satisfy their needs or achieve their goals.”⁸³

⁸⁰Cross (2011), 647f.

⁸¹Cross (2011), 657, note 28; see also 650.

⁸²See Cross (2011), 653 and 648, where he explicitly connects his view with Alasdair MacIntyre’s work on human dependence.

⁸³Cross (2011), 650f. Cross does suggest that some impairments could be overcome or ‘fixed’; see 652.

4 Heavenly Disabilities

In this section, I begin to develop a view on which disability can be present in the eschaton without commitment to Haeurwas’s dictum. On this view, however, it’s not the case that human nature entails impairment (and thus isn’t as radical as Cross’s). The view developed here is consistent with the claim that some disabilities can and even will be absent in resurrection bodies.

I begin by pointing out that I don’t think that disability is a single, unified thing. Rather, as I’ve argued elsewhere, our concept of ‘disability’ is a socially constructed *Ballung* or cluster concept.⁸⁴ Rather than being constituted by a set of necessary and jointly sufficient conditions which are met for all disabilities and which must be met for a thing to properly fall under the concept of disability, we should think about disability as a cluster concepts with ill-defined edges. As a *Ballung* concept, there is no single right or wrong characterization of what the nature of ‘disability’ is. This realization gives us reason to justifiably treat different disabilities in different ways, including thinking some can be present in heaven even if others won’t be. Following Elizabeth Barnes, I think that what we say about particular disabilities depends on details of that disability. We can’t assume from the beginning that there will be a usefully unified category that can capture the full range of disabilities—physical, psychological, cognitive, emotional. We need to instead see what can be said about individual cases and explore from the ‘ground up’ what can be said about the presence of disabilities in the afterlife.⁸⁵

It should be clear from the previous discussion that not all disabilities are essential to the personal identity of the individuals who have those disabilities.⁸⁶ Just as there are people who come to have disabilities in a way that doesn’t threaten their identity, so too it is possible for some individuals to lose their disability, whether through healing or curing or some other manner, in a way that doesn’t threaten their identity. And as I’ve pointed out in §3 when discussing Ehrman’s, Yong’s, and Mullins’s views, the fact that something is accidental to one’s identity doesn’t require that it be healed. But it also doesn’t prohibit it.

So are all disabilities removed in the resurrection? Or will there be individuals who will, in the language of Augustine from the opening epigraph to this paper, who will ‘rise again in their deformity’? It will be helpful to have in mind some terminology from the contemporary philosophical literature on disability in order to begin answering this question. The core question of Barnes’ in-

⁸⁴Nancy Cartwright and Norman Runhardt describe *Ballung* concepts as “concepts that are characterized by family resemblance between individuals rather than by a definite property. *Ballung* is a German word for a concentrated cluster” (Cartwright and Runhardt (2015), 268). For a discussion of the history of this term, see Cartwright and Bradburn (2011), 4f. See Timpe (forthcominga).

⁸⁵See Barnes (2016), 2f.

⁸⁶Whether any disabilities are essential in this way may turn out to depend on the truth of causal-origins essentialism.

fluent *The Minority Body* “involves the connection between disability and well-being.”⁸⁷ She differentiates between ‘bad-difference’ and ‘mere-difference’ views of disability with the distinction between the two as follows. Those views which hold that “disability is by itself something that makes you worse off [are] ‘bad-difference’ views of disability”⁸⁸ while mere-difference views are those according to which having a disability doesn’t by itself or automatically make you worse off. This way of drawing the contract, she notes, is “rough-and-ready”⁸⁹ for her purposes, but it should be sufficient for present purposes as well. Furthermore, the connection between the disability and the difference in well-being is important for differentiating bad-difference from mere-difference disabilities. It is consistent with a rejection of a bad-difference view that individuals with disabilities are in fact worse off than non-disabled individuals, insofar as that difference was caused by social structures or ableism. Furthermore, there can be bad effects of disabilities that would still exist in the absence of ableism. But those same disabilities might allow for other goods that are perhaps unique to or even just more common for those with the disability. So the question is if the effects caused by disability are net-negative in that they are “counterfactually stable—disability would have such effect even in the absence of ableism.”⁹⁰

Barnes doesn’t think that any physical disabilities are bad-difference disabilities, though her book leaves it open that perhaps other kinds of disabilities are.⁹¹ But suppose for the moment that there are some disabilities that involve bad-difference. Suppose, that is, that there are disabilities that involve bad-difference such that those who have them are objectively worse off in some way that isn’t just caused by ableism or problematic social structures.

Heaven is essentially a place of ultimate happiness, and no state is a state of ultimate happiness if one could be in a different state and be happier. Now, consider two ‘redeemed’ individuals. One experiences the joys of heaven and their well-being is decreased due to the presence of a bad-difference disability. The other individual experiences those same joys as the first but does not have a disability that intrinsically involves a decrease to their well-being. If we ask ourselves which of these two individuals is happier, I think it’s clear that (all else being equal) the latter life involves more happiness since it involves more well-being. So if heaven is to be the state of human existence than which none better can be conceived, I don’t see how it can involve the presence of anything which causes a decrease to our well-being.⁹² So if heaven were to involve bad-difference disabilities then it wouldn’t be a place of ultimate happiness, and

⁸⁷Barnes (2016), 54.

⁸⁸Barnes (2016), 55. While she sometimes refers to *the* bad-difference view and *the* mere-difference view, each should be understood as a family of views (much as the problem of evil is really a family of related problems).

⁸⁹Barnes (2016), 55.

⁹⁰Barnes (2016), 60.

⁹¹See Barnes (2016), 2ff.

⁹²Note that this claim rule out all sorts of states of affairs, and not just the presence of bad-difference disabilities.

hence wouldn't be worthy of the name.⁹³

Or consider the possibility of disabilities that intrinsically prevent a person's ability to worship God, or to engage in such action collectively with the other saints. If there were to be disabilities that inhibited human-divine union in this way, given the kind of perfect uniting with God that marks the beatific vision, those disabilities will no longer be present. Any state of affairs that prevents perfect union with or worship of God will be absent. But the possibility that some disabilities might have such an effect certainly doesn't entail that all disabilities are like that, and I think we have reasons (both testimonial and theological) to believe that not all disabilities would have this negative effect.

So there may be some disabilities that are healed in the eschaton. But note that the reasoning here is *not* just because a disability is present, but rather because the disability prevents perfection of the union with God characteristic of the beatific vision. For any disability that does not involve bad-difference or which does not intrinsically interfere with union with and worship of God, then the reason why it must not be present in heaven is absent. As mentioned above, there are many accidental features of our identities that will still be present in the eschaton. And so unless a disability needs to be removed for perfect union with God (and through God with others), then perhaps we should admit it into our heavenly vision. Are there disabilities whose presence doesn't interfere with such union?

I believe that there are. Consider, for instance, blindness. Certainly blindness can, and has, caused harms to individuals; that is, it has decreased their well-being. But the burden is on anyone who thinks that that decrease in well-being is primarily about one's union with God to provide for why vision is needed for union with God. Are all blind individuals objectively worse off in terms of their union with God in this life because of intrinsic features of the lack of vision? Certainly individuals with vision impairments encounter harm from non-accessible physical environments. And much harm also comes from non-accessible social environments. But surely the Christian hope for the new heaven and the new earth could be made accessible. Since all the heavenly residents will also be perfected, there's no reason to think this aspect of vision loss will defer one's heavenly joy.

But what, one might ask, about the inherent goods of visual enjoyment? Wouldn't one's heavenly enjoyment be decreased by lack of visual goods, such as being able to enjoy heavenly visual arts that will surpass the glory of even the finest work by Bernini, Rubens, Carivaggio, Grunewald, Fra Angelico, Gaudi, and Terrence Malick. And wouldn't one's heavenly enjoyment also be decreased by not being able to gaze upon the marred, resurrected, and glorified Body of the

⁹³The argument in this paragraph is a parallel of an argument that the nobly-bearded Tim Pawl and I give in Pawl and Timpe (2009), 401.

Incarnate Christ?

As tempting as those questions might be, I think they’re mistaken. First, we need to take seriously the testimony offered by those with vision impairments. In addition to the general testimony by individuals with disabilities that suggests that disability doesn’t impact well-being as much as we might think,⁹⁴ there is also literature which suggests that the dominant impact on well-being from vision loss is caused not by the impairment itself but rather by lack of social support or receiving only negative support.⁹⁵ Second, human sight even without vision impairment is inherently limited. The typical human eye can only recognize electromagnetic radiation with wavelengths from approximately 390 to 700 nm, and there are unsaturated combinations of multiple wavelengths that we also cannot recognize. Will a resurrected human with ‘normal’ vision have their otherwise perfect union with God lessened because their retinas fail to respond to light with wavelengths of 367 or 731 nm? If the answer is ‘no’, then we need a reason to think that certain wavelengths are essential to human flourishing in heaven while others are not. Third, imagine an individual with vision impairment who is aware that they are missing out on some human goods despite being in heaven. Would that awareness be sufficient to detract from the beatific vision? It’s not clear to me that it would be. If the fullness of the beatific vision is compatible with awareness of the atrocities of human history and, at least on traditional Christian views about hell, the eternal lack of the beatific vision that those in hell suffer, I think the beatific vision would also be compatible with the absence of certain created goods. To think that perfect union with God will be lessened by the lack of visual access to certain wavelengths of electromagnetic radiation may be to misunderstand the nature of our heavenly goodness.⁹⁶

Or consider individuals with cognitive disabilities.⁹⁷ The range of human cogni-

⁹⁴See the discussion in Barnes (2016), chapter 4; and Campbell and Stramondo (2017). Note that these discussions, however, are often talking about subjective rather than objective well-being, and a claim of having achieved the former doesn’t entail having achieved the latter.

⁹⁵See for instance Cimaroni and Boerner (2005). While some of the studies reviewed in the meta-study by Martin Pinguart and Jens P. Pfeiffer did find decreased in well-being among those with visual impairment, (a) these findings are inconsistent and (b) it may be “that social explanations such as public attitude to disability may contribute to lower PWB [i.e., psychological well-being] rather than the impairment itself” (Pinguart and Pfeiffer (2011), 42).

⁹⁶In a recent paper, Scott Williams argues that all humans have some degree of impairment of human functioning: “No individual human can have every kind of human function. So, all individuals have only a subset within the maximal set of human functions. Consequently, an individual’s lacking some human function is common to all humans—all humans lack some kinds of human functions” (Williams (2018), 1).

⁹⁷Not everyone uses the terms ‘cognitive disability’ and ‘intellectual disability’ in the same way, or in the same way as others use them. In the introduction to their *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, Licia Carlson and Eva Feder Kittay write that “We’ve chosen the term ‘cognitive disability,’ under which we include conditions like autism, dementia, Alzheimer’s, and [what has historically been called] mental retardation, rather than ‘intellectual disability.’ The former is broader. Also, some forms of cognitive disability do not

tive capacities is broad, even apart from issues related to disability. What degree of cognitive ability is needed for perfect human with God? The higher we set the relevant cognitive bar, the fewer humans will surpass that limit.⁹⁸ And as with vision, I think there’s no reason to think that all individuals who have some degree of cognitive disability fall below the relevant limit such that simply in virtue of having that disability their union with God is impaired. While these two suggestions have been quick and need further development, they give us a picture of how disabilities that the Christian tradition has historically thought have no place in heaven might nevertheless be compatible with perfect union with God in the eschaton.

5 Conclusion

I’ve argued that there may be some disabilities that can be retained in the afterlife in a way that doesn’t impair the beatific vision, even if there are others that may not have a place in our eschatology because they detract from a person’s flourishing. We need not think, like Augustine in the opening epigraph, that having any disability is incompatible with perfect union with God. Not all individuals with disabilities need to be ‘cured’ in order for them to be ‘made whole’. Where do we draw the line between these two types of disability? That’s an admittedly hard question. Above I’ve suggested that we need to approach this question ‘from the ground-up’, and so a fully developed account of heavenly disability will need to engage with the complete range disabilities can take.⁹⁹

Finally, it bears mentioning that the view I’ve developed here is admittedly speculative and tentative. Nevertheless, it has its merits. I think it not only allows but encourages us to take seriously the testimony of individuals with disabilities, even if that testimony is ultimately defeasible. Furthermore, it can help us avoid some of the negatives assumptions that have pervaded much of Church history (e.g., the conflation of disability and sin, tropes of virtuous suffering,

imply diminished intellectual capacity (e.g., autism)” (Carlson and Kittay (2010), 1 note 1). See also Carlson (2010). Following them, I will speak of cognitive disability and intend my use of the term to cover the wider category of disability which includes but isn’t limited to intellectual disability.

⁹⁸The practice of infant baptism suggests that the community’s act of faith can function as an occurrent act of faith when the individual being baptized isn’t able to will to accept God’s grace for themselves. As Richard Cross puts it, “in this case [of infant baptism] actual faith is necessary for salvation; someone who lacks it has to have her faith somehow completed by the actual faith of another” (Cross (2012), 437). It may be that a corporate virtue of charity might be able to function similarly in the eschaton to the way that a corporate virtue of faith can in infant baptism in a way that makes even the most severe cognitive impairment compatible with perfect charity.

⁹⁹It may be, as has also been suggested by Scott Williams that God allows some people to make this decision for themselves. Using mobility impairment as an example, he suggests that “in cases in which it matters to an individual whether her body limits her speed that God would ask whether she wishes to keep this bodily configuration” (personal correspondence). So far as both options are compatible with perfect union with God, I see no reason to rule out this possibility.

segregationist and exclusionary models of ‘charity’), even if the acceptance of heavenly disability isn’t strictly necessary for avoiding those negatives. Given that our eschatology shapes our Christian practices,¹⁰⁰ viewing disability as something that always requires ‘healing’ makes it easier to devalue the lives of those with disabilities. Speaking of eschatological reflection on disability as a kind of ‘frontier theology’, theologian John Hull writes that “we discover that disability itself is not a problem. What faith does is to grasp people with disabilities and pull them into the body of Christ, where, as Paul says, the parts that were sometimes looked down on are now given the highest honours.”¹⁰¹

Many women have refused to abort children diagnosed as having disabilities, thereby giving us stories of ‘defiant births’ that can teach us about radical parental love. So too perhaps an account of ‘defiant afterlives’ that seeks to embrace rather than eschew disability can teach us something about the even more radical love of God for his creation.

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¹⁰⁰Despite their other disagreements, Yong and Mullins both make explicit note of this point. See Yong (2007), 291 and Mullins (2011), 25.

¹⁰¹Hull (2014), 96. By ‘frontier theology’, Hull means theology “seeks to interpret some area of human life which lies outside Christian faith, or which seems at first sight to lie outside” (54).

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