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Neither the First, nor the Strangest: Negotiating Human Difference as Members of the Christian Tradition

Part I: Why Look Back?

In what sense can "disability" be an object of scientific study? Is it an entity in the world, like an apple? Is it an experience? And if it is an experience, is disability something that some people have but other people can only observe from the outside? Or perhaps disability is a phenomenon that impinges on *each one of us* in some way, even if many people do not notice it? Who is authorized to answer such questions, and so to define what is and is not a disability?

Thomas Kuhn[1] made it an academic commonplace to admit that every university discipline will undergo generational and factional struggles over the definitions of key terms as research cultures define and redefine themselves. Thus, those moments when a discipline can no longer agree on its object of study is a position at once perilous and also promising. I raise these issues to draw attention to the devilishly difficult question at the heart of disability theology: what warrants lumping conditions like the following together under the single heading "disability"? Macular degeneration, Down's syndrome, quadriplegia acquired in an accident, cerebral palsy, obsessive compulsive disorder, and bipolar disorder are all called disabilities, but do they really share anything in common? Neurologists researching autism, for example, often assume that what is currently lumped under that label is unlikely to be a single neurologically unified entity. The thing we call "autism" is more likely a cluster of disparate neurological

[1] Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago [3]1996.

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patterns, acquired by different etiological pathways, but which produce apparently similar behavioral profiles that are gathered today under the heading "autism".[2]

Definitional problems of this sort often haunt social scientific studies of disability. When social scientists study the experiences of those with intellectual and physical disabilities, they must often deploy noticeably different investigative methods. This yields results in which experiences of people with physical disabilities are presented as different in kind from those with learning impairments. Thus the question: are they then studying a single phenomenon or several? Methodologically speaking, social scientists almost always evade the question of whether disability is a single phenomenon.

Researchers who look at disability from a theological or religious perspective can typically at least agree that it is insufficient to define disability as deviation from supposedly "normal" human functioning, as defined by the medical establishment. Beyond this bare-minimum agreement, little consensus has emerged as to the *object* of disability theology. The primarily critical and emancipative discourse of disability studies has worked very hard to prevent the solidification of superficial alternative definitions of disability, in order to avoid slipping into confusing our descriptive terms with the things, attitudes, and behaviors that the words are supposed to be helping us to understand.

It is not difficult to find people who self-identify as disabled. It is at least possible to investigate what people mean when they use these self-descriptions. The social sciences have developed a powerful set (or sets) of practices for bringing such experiences into textual form, neatly circumventing investigative paralysis before the definitional paradoxes surrounding the concept of disability. But we have already seen why this can only be a pragmatic solution to the problem of

[2] Hye Ran Park et al., A Short Review on the Current Understanding of Autism Spectrum Disorders, in: *Experimental Neurobiology* 25 (2016), 1, p. 1–13, https://doi.org/10.5607/en.2016.25.1.1, accessed on: 13.02.2025.

defining disability in that it evades more fundamental definitional questions. *Whose* experience will be studied as a "disability" experience? And what aspects of those experiences will be counted as the "disabled" part? Some who were born with conditions that have been labelled disabilities cannot be said to *experience* disability, as they experience their own lives as utterly unremarkable. If they have an "experience of disability," it is a slowly dawning awareness that others seem to treat them like they are different, expecting different things from them. Often, these are precisely the people who cannot articulate their own experiences for empirical researchers.

Furthermore, ought we to consider those who live with such people as not themselves disabled, yet still having a disability experience? Does dividing "disability experiences" from "having a disability" reinscribe medical models of disability? To take a different example, some people may experience chronic, debilitating pain, or highly distracting obsessions, and yet not be considered disabled by most people even though their experience is clearly one of impaired function.[3] Finally, there are socially understandable reasons why some people who medicine might class as disabled, but who do not want to identify themselves as disabled. The design of social science studies at the religion and disability intersection often do not carefully address these problems.

I have attempted to respond to these problems as a theologian on the basis of two core premises. My first premise has been that the topos "disability" represents a non-superficial *reality access problem*. Paralleling the dilemma of cosmologists studying dark matter, disability theologians assume that there must be *something* connecting a set of widely observable and yet somehow opaque phenomena. Yet sometimes commonly accepted definitions and explanations seem inaccurate or superficial, or contradict each other. In such moments it becomes clear that widely shared descriptions of the various

[3] Alison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, Bloomington, Ind. 2013.

phenomena involved must, in some way, be misleading us and obscuring the very object they aim to describe.

My second premise has been that traditions give us different types of reality access. All modern and ancient traditions of knowledge configure the reality-perceptions of those who inhabit them. Put more strongly: traditions endure only when they render our experience intelligible. A genuine Christian ethics thus will neither sacrifice nor deny our traditioned past. The past is an appeal to discover the living truth that animated our predecessors, and to creatively assume it in new contexts. Furthermore, this stance demands we attend to the ethics of *how we deploy* appeals to the past, which are often invoked with gestures that suggest that the status quo is sacrosanct.[4] I am suggesting that we should engage historical Christian theological claims today because they hold out the promise of an epistemological gain that can, and should, be harnessed to generate social criticism on behalf of and alongside those who are labelled "disabled" and excluded from the traditional structures of socio-political engagement.

If traditional theological claims are harnessed today as an emancipative discourse it demands engaging the cultural work involved in the creative receipt of internally heterogenous traditions in new settings. As the disability theologian Thomas Reynolds has insightfully observed,

> "Communities of memory do not simply collect episodic events and place them in sequential order; rather, they reconstitute by re-gathering or re-collecting the past in a way that highlights certain events as formative, accordingly interpreting other events in their light".[5]

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[4] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. Bernard Frechtman, New York 1976, p. 97–103.

[5] Thomas E. Reynolds, Past and Present with Disability in the Christian Tradition, in: *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 17 (2013), 3, p. 287–294, quotation at p. 290, https://doi.org/10.1080/15228967.2013.809884 , accessed on: 13.02.2025.

Nowhere is this more obvious than when bringing a modern idea like disability to the ancient traditions of Christian theology.

Part II: Why look back at Augustine?

In the fertile heartlands in which the patristic era culminated, some Christians already sensed that to think well about disability brought one, almost inevitably, before questions of intercultural engagement. Consider this passage from Augustine, as he wrestles with how to explain to the parents whose child has a birth defect that their child was still human, even if their bodies took an unexpected form.

> The histories of the nations tell of certain monstrous races of men. If these tales are to be believed, it may be asked whether such monsters are descended from the sons of Noah, or rather from that one man from whom the sons of Noah themselves have come. Some of these are said to have only one eye, in the middle of their forehead. Others have feet which point backwards, behind their legs. Others combine in themselves the nature of both sexes, having the right breast of a man and the left of a woman, and, when they mate, they take it in turns to beget and conceive. Others have no mouths and live only by breathing through their nostrils. Others again are only a cubit high, and these are called Pygmies by the Greeks, after their word for a cubit, *pygme*. … It is not, of course, necessary to believe in all the kinds of men which are said to exist.[6]

If western theology is basically Augustinian (along with much of its philosophy, I would suggest), then thinking well about disability will need to begin by assessing the characteristic blind spots of that tradition without dismissing the insights that can be gleaned from it which help us think about disability in intercultural context today. I'll approach that task briefly, under three headings.

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[6] Augustine, *The City of God against the Pagans*, ed. and trans. R.W. Dyson, Cambridge 1998, XVI.8, p. 707. Along with the various myths circulating in the ancient world, Augustine has Gen. 6:1–4 in mind here.

1. The overdetermination of the Western theological imagination by creation

Very early on, western theology slipped an imagination of the body which was highly materialist in orientation. Augustine comes out of the North African theological tradition in which no one batted an eye when Tertullian spent some energy speculating about what weight and age we will be when we are resurrected, and wondered whether the fat will rise to heaven more slowly than the skinny.[7] Augustine is very much in this speculative tradition when he asks in his City of God what size the resurrected bodies of aborted fetuses will be,[8] whether or not all people will be resurrected in a uniform size[9] to an optimal age[10] or with their sexual organs still in place.[11] For Augustine these are the questions we must ask if we are to take with full literalness the biblical promise that "not a hair will be lost". Augustine seriously wants to explore whether this biblical promise requires the restoration of hair and fingernail clippings[12] and will even apply to people who have been cannibalized.[13]

The problem here is not that these speculations are organized by the doctrine of creation to the exclusion of

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7 "Emaciation displeases not us; for it is not by weight that God bestows flesh, any more than He does 'the Spirit by measure.' More easily, it may be, through the 'straight gate' of salvation will slenderer flesh enter; more speedily will lighter flesh rise; longer in the sepulcher will drier flesh retain its firmness." Tertullian, *On Fasting*, Ante-Nicene Fathers IV, ed. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson, Grand Rapids 1979, XVII. In fairness to Tertullian, the comment is a typically overstated rhetorical flourish that comes in the context of a polemic commending fasting rather than on the resurrection per se. Elsewhere Tertullian is very careful and sophisticated in negotiating the concerns Yong has laid out (in common with much Patristic thought). See his *On Resurrection*.

8 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.13.

9 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.14.

10 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.15.

11 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.17–18.

12 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.19.

13 Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.20.

Christology (Augustine affirms that the measure of human perfection is the resurrected height, weight and age as Jesus[14]): the problem is that the Christology and eschatology *are not social at their root, but individual and physical*. In the guise of eschatological speculation they generate a definition of the proper or normal human by which every human being must be measured at the same time as they project commonsense material definitions of what counts as a healthy human being as pictures of resurrected perfection.[15]

As the Gospels present him, at least, Jesus's own eschatological imagination seems to begin not by projecting commonsense views of the body but that the most noteworthy feature of the coming eschaton is its overturning and reformulation of human certainties and viewpoints. For him eternity is a

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[14] Augustine concludes as follows, differing only from Yong in suggesting that our infirmities will be immediately, rather than gradually healed. "So then: all are to rise with a body of the same size as they had, or would have had, in the prime of life. But it would in any case be no hardship even if the form of the body were to be that of a child or an old man, provided that no infirmity of mind or body remained. Thus, even if someone contends that everyone will rise with the same kind of body as he had when he died, we need not devote too much effort to the task of arguing the point with him." Augustine, *City of God*, XXII.16.

[15] Even emphasizing the revelatory aspect of eschatology does not diffuse the problem of moral projection. It is almost impossible not to project culturally dominant images of health and happiness onto resurrection bodies. When, after the death of an infant that was by any account severely deformed, no less than three people independently came and told his parents that they had had visions of "a young boy with blondish hair and a striped shirt running while playing" (Aaron D. Cobb, *Loving Samuel: Suffering, Dependence, and the Calling of Love,* Eugene, Ore. 2014, p. 59-61) two questions should immediately be raised. Augustine asks: Will this child have *no* signs of his vocation on earth in the resurrection? And Barth follows: Would we be offended if he was resurrected bearing marks of that strange vocation? See discussion in Don Wood, This Ability: Barth on the Concrete Freedom of Human Life in: Brian Brock/John Swinton (ed.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, Grand Rapids 2012, p. 392-426, here: p. 392–393.

domain that reaches into the present.[16] This is why Jesus called the way of life that he inaugurated the Kingdom of Heaven.

To summarize point 1:[17] In Christian theology, speculations about resurrected *bodies*, to the limited extent that these may be necessary, must elaborate what Christians believe about redeemed *sociality*. To work the other way around is to reproduce one of the more problematic aspects of the Christian, or at least western, theological tradition, namely, its overweighting of creation in its definition of the human to yield a remarkably literalist and materialist understanding of the body.

2. The co-option of western theological imagination by rationalist anthropology and soteriology

Augustine never wavered from his insistence that all humans are good because created by the hand of a good God, who creates nothing that is not good. He is also pastorally very sensitive to the human tendency to pity or shun those considered "monstrous". He considers this recoil from people with severe disabilities sinful, and believes that precisely because humans are rational souls, this is a sinful proclivity that can be healed.

Commenting on the creation of humans in the book of Genesis, Augustine concludes that "it was in the very factor in which he surpasses non-rational animate beings that man was made to God's image." Because created rational,

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[16] Hans G. Ulrich, *Eschatologie und Ethik: die theologische Theorie der Ethik in ihrer Beziehung auf die Rede von Gott seit Friedrich Schleiermacher*, München 1988 (Beiträge zur evangelischen Theologie 104); Bernd Wannenwetsch, Representing the Absent in the City, in: L. Gregory Jones/Reinhard Hütter/C. Rosalee Velloso Ewell (ed.), *God, Truth, and Witness: Engaging Stanley Hauerwas*, Grand Rapids, Mich. 2005, p. 167–192.

[17] The speculations of western patristic theologians like as Tertullian and Augustine on the resurrection body signal the weak point of western theological anthropologies, as I discuss in Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability and the Body of Christ*Waco, Tex. 2019), p. 186–188.

> "the apostle too says: Be renewed in the spirit of your minds and put on the new man, who is being renewed for the recognition of God according to the image of him who created him (Rom 12:2; Eph 4:23–4; Col 3:10) . . . he makes it plain enough just in what part of man was created in God's image—that it was not in the features of the body but in a certain form of the illuminated mind".[18]

"After all," he concludes, in *De Trinitate*,

> "the authority of the apostle as well as plain reason assures us that man was not made to the image of God as regards the shape of his body, but as regards his rational mind. It is an idle and base kind of thinking which supposes that God is confined within the limits of a body with features and limbs."[19]

In linking creation, the work of redemption, and the imago dei in this manner, Augustine ontologically grounds his assertion that every human being is created rational. Only because we are created rational can our minds be illuminated in a manner that lifts us out of our sinful repulsion to some human beings. Only rational beings can be redeemed and so relate to "monstrous" human beings rightly.

While not having a modern functionalist account of human rationality, but Augustine does assume that rationality is definitional of the human. His reading works not from any observable *created* human capacities—since some people may not appear to be rational at all—instead developing the Genesis command to have dominion (Gen 1:28[20]) by focusing it through the Pauline insistence that a *redemptive* renewal of the mind is a necessary aspect of salvation (Rom. 12:2).

So while Augustine seems to establish rationality as central to the definition of the human in a way that would render the full humanity of some humans lacking capacities problematic,

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[18] Augustine, *On Genesis*, ed. John E. Rotelle O.S.A., trans. Edmund Hill O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine, I/13, Hyde Park, N.Y. 2004, p. 30.

[19] Augustine, *The Trinity*, edited by John E. Rotelle O.S.A., translated by Edmund Hill O.P., The Works of Saint Augustine, I/5 (Hyde Park, N.Y. [2]2012), XII.3.12.

[20] Augustine, City of God I.20.

he clearly does so in a manner that is more sophisticated than those modern accounts of the human that tend to disparage human lives with impaired rationality as something tragic and perhaps not capable of flourishing. Because Augustine's concern is with rationality as the locus of human transformation, he offers us some provocative avenues for thinking about the fundamental and distinguishing features of human nature—whether actually expressed or not.

3. Pastoral engagements with disability expose cracks in theological descriptions

In classical Greece and Rome the dominant cosmological and religious beliefs positioned an anomalous birth as the product of a complex web of natural and supernatural forces. The shape of the deformities of a non-standard birth mattered, and the birth of such children was immediately perceived through a library of stories, deformed limbs might evoking the status of various half-human, half-animal, half-demonic figures.[21] Disfiguring congenital conditions were assumed to be the work of supernatural powers needing placation and exorcism for the protection of the polis. The responsible thing to do was to protect the household and city against the ill effects associated such children by leaving them to die of exposure.[22]

a) Born from woman, but not much of a deviation from the norm

Early in the fifth century AD Augustine engaged this problematic as a theologian, so taking up a theme that had rarely, if ever, appeared in Christian literature to this point: how to

[21] Lorraine Daston and Katherine Park provide an overview of this theme across the pre-Christian, patristic and medieval west in *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1150–1750*, New York1998, ch 1.

[22] Almut Caspary, The Patristic Era: Early Christian Attitudes toward the Disfigured Outcast, in: Brock/Swinton (ed.), *Disability in the Christian Tradition*, p. 24–64.

understand the birth of an abnormal child.[23] Like everyone else at that time, he understood such births as clear departures from the orderly progress of nature.[24] Questions would immediately be swirling about the probity of the child's parents

[23] In directly addressing the problem of anomalous births, Augustine is deploying Christian theology to parse one of the perennial problems of human kinship formation. Michael C. Banner, *Ethics of Everyday Life: Moral Theology, Social Anthropology, and the Imagination of the Human*, Oxford 2014, chap. 2. Contemporary prenatal testing practices are directly and intentionally configured to reshape these processes and do so in ways that highlight the anomalous birth as a problem. Lisa M. Mitchell/Eugenia Georges, Cross-Cultural Cyborgs: Greek and Canadian Women's Discourses on Fetal Ultrasound, in: *Feminist Studies* 23, (1997), 2, p. 373–401. This kinship formation process is deeply intertwined with processes of the classification of newborns and continues to have life and death stakes implications in both western and non-western contexts. Jónína Einarsdóttir, The classification of newborn children: consequences for survival, in: Luke Clements/Janet Read, *Disabled People and the Right to Life: Protection and Violation of Disabled People's Most Basic Human Rights*, London 2008, p. 249–264. Mary Douglas discusses the hermeneutical questions at stake with reference to the Nuer tribe of the Sudan, who spoke of anatomically anomalous babies as baby hippopotamus born to humans and who restore social order by leaving the child in the river. Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Pollution and Taboo*, London 2002, p. 47–50.

[24] It is perhaps more accurate to say that like everyone of every time. "Stone Age cave drawings, for example, record monstrous births, while prehistoric gravesites evince elaborate ritual sacrifices of such bodies. Clay tablets at the Assyrian city of Nineveh describe in detail sixty-two of what we would now call congenital abnormalities, along with their prophetic meanings. Aristotle, Cicero, Pliny, Augustine, Bacon, and Montaigne account for such disruptions of the seemingly natural order in their interpretative schemata. For these fathers of Western thought, the differently formed body is most often evidence of God's deign, divine wrath, or Nature's abundance, but it is always an interpretative occasion." Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Introduction: From Wonder to Error: A Genealogy of Freak Discourse in Modernity, in: Rosemarie Garland Thomson (ed.), *Freakery: Cultural Spectacles of the Extraordinary Body*, New York 1996, p. 1–8, quotation from 1.

in the bedroom,[25] about the fortunes of the community into which the baby was born, and about whether or not the baby was in fact even human. Augustine begins from the last question. Christians too have heard the many stories circulating in pagan culture about strange foreign races.[26]

> But anyone who is born anywhere as a man (that is, as a rational and mortal animal), no matter how unusual he may be to our bodily senses in shape, colour motion, sound, or in any natural power or part or quality, derives from the original and first-created man; and no believer will doubt this. It is, however, clear what constitutes the natural norm in the majority of cases and what, in itself, is a marvellous rarity.[27]

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[25] Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, New York 1988, p. 24–25.

[26] Though offensive to contemporary sensibilities, Augustine's use of the language of "monster" to describe the anomalous human form was utterly conventional. *Monstrum* or *monstri* indicated any break with the natural order, which could be regarded as unnatural (as in modern usage), but also an omen or portent. Paul Murgatroyd surveys the wider landscape in *Mythical Monsters in Classical Literature*, London2007. It would be counterproductive to obscure this with a more politically correct translation, not least because this chapter will attempt to show where his language is pushing beyond convention and where it is not—and more importantly, the direction of travel of these changes. In Valerio Marchetti /Vanonela Salomoni (ed.), *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975*, trans. Graham Burchell, London 2016, Michel Foucault offers a penetrating discussion of the theological and legal issues which swirled around the term "monster" from ancient to early modern contexts, which includes a biopolitical account of the transformation of the ascription of someone as a "monster" from a description of their body into a category of immoral behaviour (63–75).

[27] Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8, 707–708. Augustine is assuming ontological stability in making this argument: human beings cannot turn into non-humans and vice versa, a view that held throughout the medieval period, though increasingly complex theories were developed to account for the illusion that they might (visible, for instance, in Luther's assumptions about non-human babies). Augustine did not oppose all metamorphosis, and was undisturbed with the changing of rods into snakes in Exodus 7. It is important to be clear that an author's sensibility about the possibility of metamorphosis in creation in general is distinguishable from his or her

This being Augustine, the pastoral is intertwined with the exegetical, in this case, a question about the repopulation of the earth after the flood. After asking how animals released from the ark could have reached even far flung ocean islands,[28] he has taken up the question of whether, as the myths of the pagans indicate, there might be other races of human-like beings.[29] His conclusion is unambiguous: human beings are creatures born from other humans, are therefore rational in kind and possess a rational soul. He also insists that *every* human being in existence is good because *created by God exactly as they are*.

> For God is the Creator of all things: He Himself knows where and when anything should be, or should have been, created; and He knows how to weave the beauty of the whole out of the similarity and diversity of its parts. The man who cannot view the whole is offended by what he takes to be the deformity of a part; but this is because he does not know how it is to be adapted or related to the whole. We know of men who were born with more than five fingers or five toes. This is a trivial thing and not any great divergence from the norm. God forbid, however, that someone who does not know why the Creator has done what He has done should be foolish enough to suppose that God has in

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beliefs about the possibility of animal-human transformations. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Metamorphosis and Identity*, New York 2001, p. 82.

[28] Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.7.

[29] Augustine's strategy here is incredibly prescient. "The presence of the anomalous human body, at once familiar and alien, has unfolded as well within the collective cultural consciousness into fanciful hybrids such as centaurs, griffins, satyrs, minotaurs, sphinxes, mermaids, and cyclopses—all figures that are perhaps the mythical explanations for the starling bodies whose curious lineaments gesture toward other modes of being and confuse comforting distinctions between what is human and what is not. What seems clearest in all this…is that the extraordinary body is fundamental to the narratives by which we make sense of ourselves and our world." Thomson, *Introduction*, p. 1.

> such cases erred in allotting the number of human fingers. So, then, even if a greater divergence should occur, He whose work no one may justly condemn knows what He has done.[30]

Augustine never reads scripture without one eye on the material world, and in this case his earthy empiricism yields the observation that most people seem to be born in a rather predictable configuration.[31] Hence the pastoral question: how should parents whose child seems different, out of the ordinary, perceive this child? After all, as bewildering as it might be for the individuals involved, it is not exactly a rare occurrence.

> …who could call to mind all the human infants who have been born very unlike those who were most certainly their parents? It cannot be denied, however, that these derive their origin from that one man, Adam; and the same is therefore true of all those races which, by reason of their bodily differences, are said to

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[30] Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8, 708.

[31] Augustine is keen to emphasize that this is not a claim he makes from second-hand knowledge. "We know of men who were born with more than five fingers or five toes. This is a trivial thing and not any great divergence from the norm. God forbid, however, that someone who does not know why the Creator has done what He has done should be foolish enough to suppose that God has in such cases erred in allotting the number of human fingers. So, then, even if a greater divergence should occur, He Whose work no one my justly condemn knows what He has done. There is at Hippo Zaritus a man who has crescent-shaped feet with only two toes on each; and his hands are similar. If there were any race with these features, it would be added to our list of the curiosities and wonders of nature. But are we for this reason to deny that this man is descended from that one man who was created in the beginning? Again, though they are rare, it is difficult to find times when there have been no *androgyni*, also called hermaphrodites: persons who embody the characteristics of both sexes so completely that it is uncertain whether they should be called male or female. However, the prevailing habit of speech has named them according to the superior sex, that is, the male." Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8, 709.
This last comment also highlights Augustine's prioritizing of the male gaze. This prioritization was characteristic of Greco-Roman philosophy, and Augustine's lack of awareness of it provides another barrier to contemporary readers sensitized to both feminist and disability concerns.

> have deviated from the usual pattern of nature exhibited by most, indeed by almost the whole—of mankind. If these races are included in the definition of 'human', that is, if they are rational and mortal animals, then it must be admitted that they trace their lineage from that same one man, the first father of all mankind. [32]

A theological question remains that goes to the heart of Augustine's pastoral response to the parents of an apparently anomalous child. If there are races of different sorts of human beings, they must have been created by God for a reason.

> Perhaps it was so that, when monsters are born of men among us, as they must be, we should not think them the work of an imperfect craftsman: perhaps it was so that we should not suppose that, despite the wisdom with which He fashions the nature of human beings, God has on this occasion erred. In which case, it ought not to seem absurd to us that, just as some monsters occur within the various races of mankind, so there should be certain monstrous races within the human race as a whole. I shall, then, conclude my discussion of the question with a tentative and cautious answer. Either the written accounts which we have of some of these races are completely worthless; or, if such creatures exist, they are not men; or, if they are men, they are descended from Adam.[33]

Augustine's pastoral response offers all Christians a densely layered accounting of the unexpectedly formed human child. A child's body is legible as a work of God in the same way as the myths of fabulous races.[34] While clearly comforting pa-

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[32] Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8, 709.

[33] Augustine, *City of God* XVI.8, 709–710. This question was still alive and well in Christendom 1000 years after Augustine. John Locke addresses anomalous births directly in *An Essay on Human Understanding* and reaches a very different conclusion that Augustine. To be *born* from a human and to have a human *shape* is no guarantee of being human: a human *mind* is required. What he calls "changelings" and "idiots" are left in Locke's scheme marginally human at best, and so are excluded from the kingdom of heaven and secular political life (4.4.13–14).

[34] "Moreover, the explanation which is given of monstrous human births among us can also be given in the case of some of these monstrous races."

rents confused by the birth of a child who looks very unlike them, Augustine's wider aim is to normalize human diversity as a natural part of God's story with creation. On occasions he can even invert the negative connotations of anomalous births, and call people with disabilities "wondrous" in being a special creation of God. [35]

With this inversion of the ancient view of disability as threatening Augustine lays the foundations of the modern view of disability, and as he does so setting the framework for the problems to come in thinking disability for centuries to come. He both asks us to think pastorally about anomalous births, and affirm such lives as wholly human and valuable.

Augustine, *City of God*, XVI.8, 708.

[35] Even more strikingly, Augustine urges Christians to read this expected appearance of the unexpected not as freakish or repulsive but a special *communicative act* of God.

"Not many years ago, within living memory, a person was born in the East who had two heads, two chests, four hands, as though he were two persons, but one stomach, and two feet, as though he were one. And he lived long enough and the case was so well known that many people went to see the wonder." Augustine, *The City of God*, Books VIII–XVI, trans. Gerald G. Walsh and Grace Monahan, Washington DC1952, XVI.8.

The modern genre of the Siamese twin separation documentary is best read as a restoration of the ancient wonder tradition, as well as the tradition of making a public spectacle of "monstrous births", but with a new twist: "[I]t seems worth asking how, in the postmodern milieu of media images and simulations, this line of development from the freak as a sign or augury to the freak as sickness is complicated, perhaps even folded back upon itself. Contemporary representations of conjoined twins pathologize them, to be sure; yet deviant corporeality remains uncannily portentous, even if what it provides comes in the form of a profoundly secular revelation: through it, we witness the advent of a world of fully instrumentalized bodies, a "high-tech" place of "postmodern plasticity" where there will be no morphology, no matter how malformed, that cannot be altered and normalized. Under these spectacularized conditions, we are not so much looking at conjoined twins as peering in awe at the expensive expertise that will transform us by transforming them." David L. Clark/Catherine Myser, Being Humaned: Medical Documentaries and the Hyperrealization of Conjoined Twins, in: Thomson (ed.), *Freakery*, p. 338–55, quotation from p. 352.

But he cannot find a way to do so without invoking the "normal" human. We have not progressed very far from this definition of the problem of talking about disability in the intervening centuries.

b) A stone throwing saint challenges Augustine's rationalist anthropology

I want to take my final example in a slightly more homiletical direction. I want to ask how Augustine preached disability. Here we enter into slightly more speculative territory—and also into the domain of theological provocation, out of which new theological insights typically emerge.

Let's begin by recalling that ancient people saw birth and death almost every day. That humans and animals had a fleshly nature could not be more obvious. This made that moment when the flesh of human babies stand upright to speak highly symbolically important. In this gesture merely animal life was being lifted from the four-footed gait of animals by the powers distinctive of human beings alone, the capacity for abstract rationality and language. By implication, something must have gone drastically wrong if a particular human being never surpassed the mental capacity of brute animals

Given this cultural constructive, we can begin to appreciate how highly counterintuitive it was for Augustine to label a man he knew a saint. This man was of the class at the time labelled "*Moriones*" in Greek, "*idiotus*" in Latin; in English, "fools". In one passage of *A treatise on the merits and forgiveness of sins, and on the baptism of infants*, Augustine writes:

> There was once a certain person of this class [*Moriones*] who was so Christian, that although he was patient to the degree of strange folly with any amount of injury to himself, he was utterly impatient of any insult to the name of Christ or to the religion with which he was imbued. Whenever his gay and clever audience proceeded to blaspheme the sacred name, as they sometimes would in order to provoke his patience, he could never

> refrain from pelting them with stones; and on these occasions he would show no favour even to persons of rank.[36]

Augustine takes it as self-evident that God has created this man, and also saved him, as proved by his zealous love of Jesus. Such lives, he continues, God has brought into existence in order that those who are able should understand that God's grace and the Spirit "blows where it listeth," and does not pass over any kind of capacity in the sons of mercy…so that "he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord".

Not being able to explain how a life that is so "abnormal" according to his philosophical anthropology can be so clearly Christian, Augustine is forced to conclude that such people have received what he calls "strange vocations". In saying this he does not reject the sort of descriptions of medical function we use to describe disability today. He admits that in terms of so called "normal" function people can appropriately be called deficient, sick, or impaired. But he insists that such descriptions say very little about what it means to be human. Human life is severely misunderstood when reduced to the dimensions of a medical or psychological diagnosis.

It is almost certain that Augustine invoked our unnamed stone-throwing saint in the sermons he preached almost daily in the cathedral in Carthage. The story fit too neatly with several of his recurrent points of emphasis. We know from the sermons that have come down to us that he was not above the common pastor's frustration at not seeing more saintliness among his congregants. His description of our saint also fit neatly with his recurrent tendency to contrast outer physical beauty with the inner beauty of virtue favoured by the Neoplatonic philosophers who so influenced him.

Augustine's conclusion is unambiguous: it is not intelligence or eloquence that matters in the Christian life, but zeal

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[36] Augustine, *A Treatise on the Merits and Forgiveness of Sins, and on the Baptism of Infants*, *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 5, ed. Philip Schaff, Grand Rapids 1978, p. 27–28, chap. 32.

in following Christ. In his public defence of the honour of the name of Jesus this man reveals himself to be a true saint. He might have a "strange vocation," but it is divinely given, and Holy Spirit inspired.

Many Christians today are jarred by this assessment, having been so deeply shaped by modern medical sensibilities. It comes more naturally to us to view such behaviour as embarrassing and pitiful, a worrying symptom of intellectual deficiency or mental illness. This is behaviour calling for medical, if not police intervention, and probably reveals a lack of capacity for taking moral responsibility. Where we see illness and disability, Augustine sees a saint. He refuses to let a lack of raw intelligence rob anyone of moral agency, and so the capacity for saintliness.

The violence of the story also unsettles us. To public intellectuals like Richard Dawkins and Peter Sloterdijk, zeal is the basic component of radicalization, and radicalism the sworn opponent of modern secular tolerance. As Tallal Asad has often observed, modern liberal societies make one demand on believers of any and all religions: to "take their beliefs lightly." There is more than a grain of truth in the secularists' fear of religious zeal metastasizing into violence. Yet the biblical narrative hints that this warning cannot be the whole story. "Zeal for your house consumes me" says Psalm 69:9. To the ears of the gospel writers this sounded like a prophetic prefiguration of Jesus' ministry.

Augustine's saint takes the second command of the Decalogue, to reverence God's name, with a literalness Christians today find hard to imagine. In calling our man with the strange vocation a saint, Augustine is labelling him an exemplary Christian. This ascription also challenges the widespread sense of protectiveness toward people with disabilities in western liberal democracies. Augustine's story suggests that the people we today label disabled may, in God's providence, have things to teach us about being Christian that we could never have anticipated. Maybe the first lesson we learn from his calling this man a saint is to throw up questions about the

certainty with which we label and categorize people, especially those with learning difficulties or mental illnesses—so robbing them of their moral agency.

Or perhaps it is our stone throwing saint's ability to see past social rank that remains his most important witness today. This insight flowered in medieval Christendom in the form of disabled people being celebrated in the form of court jesters, the only ones sanctioned to speak out and tell uncomfortable truths about the king—a late echo of the role of the prophets in the Hebrew traditions of state authority. The biblical narratives often highlight how fearing God alone deflates the morally paralyzing fear of men and their power and apparent moral right. True, such zealous fear must be guarded against lapsing into violence. At the same time, such holy fear engenders a courage that dares to speak out against the noble lies that the powerful promulgate to stabilize the status quo. To dare the personal risk of speaking out against the patent injustice that benefits the powerful is unthinkable without zeal, the zeal we may learn from those the world looks down on.

The easy—and I would say lazy—response would be to say that Augustine has simply misread the life of someone who is clearly violent and mentally ill. The gift of the saints is that they have lived lives that blow open our certainties, and to see the odd slant of their live demands we slow down and rethink who we think we are. And sometimes, when we stop to attend to them, inclining our heads to get a better view, the whole world begins to look just that little bit differently.

Conclusion

In my view the main intellectual parameters and problematics I have highlighted in Augustine's thought continue to characterize the theological instincts that come to the surface when modern western Christians are asked to theologically describe the entity we today label "disability". Thus, to look at Augustine provides an opportunity to examine our own theological instincts and hermeneutical priorities at one remove.

And even where this mindset has secularized, we can see the marks of these emphases. Without noticing these imaginative ruts and tendencies, we are bound to entrapment in our own thought, to fall over and over again into the same aporias. But I hope that I have also suggested ways in which looking back can help us think in fresh ways about what it is to be human, and so to move forward as Christians in a world that will never eradicate disability, no matter how hard it tries.

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