Evangelical Review of Theology

GENERAL EDITOR: THOMAS SCHIRRMACHER

Volume 35 · Number 2 · April 2011

Articles and book reviews reflecting global evangelical theology for the purpose of discerning the obedience of faith

Published by

Paternoster:
thinking faith

WEA
World Evangelical Alliance
Theological Commission

for
WORLD EVANGELICAL
ALLIANCE
Theological Commission

ERT (2011) 35:2, 160-176

Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion

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KEYWORDS: *Theodicy, freedom, virtue, suffering, afterlife, social context, epistemology*

I Introduction

My goal in this essay is to interrogate traditional approaches to philosophy of religion and philosophical theology from a disability studies perspective, rethinking along the way issues in theodicy, religious epistemology, and questions of death and the afterlife that are commonly treated in traditional textbooks on philosophy of religion. This is a conversation whose time is long overdue, as disability perspectives have been noticeably absent in even the most recent discussions in the philosophy of religion. I will argue that when the human experience of disability interfaces with the philosophical discussion of religion, one of the results is a 'performative philosophy of religion' whereby philosophical reflection does not exclude the speculative moment but is an activity that shapes human dispositions, activities, and political life.

While there are an increasing number of disability studies, scholars who are trained philosophers as well as professional philosophers who have written on disability,[1] there has so far been no formal engagement with issues in the philosophy of religion. To be sure, theologians have spoken about issues in the philosophy of religion from disability perspectives,[2] but these have been taken up within a theological rather than philosophy of religion

1 The field of disability studies is relatively new but quickly developing. For an introduction, see Lennard J. Davis, ed., *The Disability Studies Reader*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2006). In this essay, I use 'disability studies perspective' synonymously with 'disability perspective'.

2 See, e.g., my *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, Tex.: Baylor University Press, 2007), and Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2008).

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framework. On the other side, besides issues in biomedical and social ethics, philosophy of education, philosophy of law, and disability as a socio-political construct (these are vitally important topics that need to be continually addressed), I also want to urge philosophers reflecting on disability to address topics in the philosophy of religion.

This is an important task for philosophical approaches to disability since it often deals, as we shall see, with assumptions at the worldview level for other philosophical and non-philosophical claims. In this essay, I propose to inform discussions in the philosophy of religion from disability studies perspectives, and in the process hope also to pave the way for philosophy of religion contributions to disability scholarship.

I will be working in this essay with a broad definition of 'disability' that is inclusive of both intellectual and physical impairments. In this view, the World Health Organization (WHO) defines a disability as 'any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being'.[3] I would only note at present that while disabilities are inevitably individual experiences, the WHO's definition opens up to include a social component inasmuch as the performance of activities are measured according to social—'within a range considered normal'—conventions. As we proceed, it should become evident that this social dimension is central to any substantive engagement between disability studies and philosophy. I will also provide more specific examples of disability as they relate to particular issues in the philosophy of religion.[4]

II Disability and the Problem of Evil: Destabilizing Traditional Theodicies

Philosophy of religion texts all address questions related to the problem of evil. Insofar as many traditional approaches discuss theological doctrines related to divine attributes—e.g., omniscience, omnipotence, omnibenevolence—these in turn have implications for the question, Why does a good and all-powerful God allow bad things to happen to innocent people? Now there is no consensus in philosophy of religion about the viability of any theodicy proposal; in fact, the consensus seems to be, rather, that there are a plurality of theodicies, each with its own strengths, but all with sufficiently glaring weaknesses that incline some to give up on the project of formulating theodicy merely as a theoretical enterprise.[5]

3 World Health Organization, *International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities, and Handicaps* (1980; reprint, Geneva: World Health Organization, 1993), 28.

4 For the record, I write not as a person with any known disability, but as a brother of a man with Down syndrome; hence the motivation of my work in this area (see also note 2 above).

5 For two critics of traditional theodicies along these lines, see Terrence W. Tilley, *The Evils of Theodicy* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1991), and Sarah Katherine Pinnock, *Beyond Theodicy: Jewish and Christian Continental Thinkers Respond to the Holocaust* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2002).

As a theist, I do not think the task of constructing theodicies should be abandoned. At the same time, I agree that there are problems across the theodicy spectrum, and that these are further intensified when assessed in disability perspective. In the following, I briefly sketch four general types of theistic responses to the problem of evil and summarize unresolved questions from a disability point of view.

1. Ontological responses

First, there are what I call ontological and/or theological models designed to address the problem of evil. By this, I am referring to responses that understand evil as either intrinsically (ontologically) woven into the fabric of the universe or as being the result of God's (at least permissive) will for the world. In the former case, there are either cosmic dualist models such as Manicheanism or primordial chaos models such as that of E. S. Brightman and, more recently, Catherine Keller,[6] any of which would alleviate God from responsibility for evil. The latter might involve either privation models like Augustine's in which evil has no ontological status of its own but is derivative from the lack of goodness, or more robust theological models like that of Calvin wherein evil is allowed or even decreed (for high Calvinists) by God in order to achieve God's greater glory.

Besides the standard criticisms of each of these models, disability perspectives would add the following specific critical observations. Regarding dualist construals, there is the concern that disability is uncritically associated with evil, with the result that people with disabilities have been seen (historically) either to have in some way deserved the evil that has befallen them or to have personified the evils feared by (nondisabled) humanity.[7]

Primordial chaos models fare a bit better, especially if disabilities are statistically distributed (randomly) across the population. This is more palatable both for the appearance of congenital disabilities related to unpredictable genetic mutations and for those that occur later in life due to accidental circumstances. However, if disability is the result of the cosmic chaos that can never be eradicated, will disability also be present in the afterlife? We will return to this question below.

Augustine's privation model was premised on the goodness of God and of God's creation. Further, Augustine reasoned that if evil is the privation or lack of good, then insofar as anything exists, that in itself is good, whatever other lacks may be pertinent in that case. The result is that there is nothing existent that is wholly evil, since such would be nothing at all. On the one hand, this view affirms the humanity, dignity, and goodness of *people* with disabilities, without insisting that the disabilities are necessarily good. On

6 E.g., Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *Personality and Religion* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1934), 71-100, and Catherine Keller, *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

7 That disabilities, and people with them, are feared by nondisabled people is well documented—e.g., Irwin Katz, *Stigma: A Social Psychological Analysis* (Hillsdale, NJ: L. Erlbaum Associates, 1981).

the other hand, for some people with disabilities, their disabilities are neither merely the lack of ability nor the lack of something else; rather, their disabilities are palpable realities that cannot be explained away through the notion of privation. For them, the notion of evil as lack, while perhaps philosophically interesting, is neither phenomenologically nor existentially satisfying.[8]

Finally perhaps the most challenging theological model for people with disabilities is that associated with or implied in the doctrine of divine sovereignty. Admittedly there are some who have come to terms with their disabilities as playing an important role in God's overall plan. The problem arises, however, when people with disabilities are told by the nondisabled that their disabilities are part of God's plan for their lives. It is one thing for an individual to come to accept his or her disability as the result of God's intentions, and embrace this as his or her own self-understanding; it is quite another for others to be told by well-meaning and able-bodied people that God has basically chosen to inflict their disabilities for God's own reasons.[9] In the latter case, rather than concluding that God can indeed be trusted, God may instead become the one who, for no apparent reason at all, has arbitrarily chosen to wreck their lives. There are pastoral issues involved here, but the fundamental question remains theological: did or did not God choose to make me the way I am?

2. Freewill Theodicy

A second type of theistic response to the problem of evil is what is often called the freewill theodicy. This position involves a family of related views that suggest the problem of evil either is the result of creaturely freedom unleashed by the fall of humankind or by the primordial fall of angels, or is related, for process theodicies, to the intrinsic freedom that pertains, in varying degrees of strength, to all creatures and even created things.[10] For advocates of the freewill defence, God is not ultimately responsible for evil; rather, God chose to create a world of free creatures because such a world is better than one without freedom. But free creatures can choose to commit evil acts, or to act in ways that bring about evil consequences.

Thus, the freewill defence emphasizes creaturely responsibility for

8 It is with great difficulty that the notion of evil as privation fits into the rugged and honest portrayal of life with disabilities in autobiographical accounts of disability—e.g., Robert F. Murphy, *The Body Silent* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1987); Leonard Kriegel, *Flying Solo: Reimagining Manhood, Courage, and Loss* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998); Hugh Gregory Gallagher, *Black Bird Fly Away: Disabled in an Able-Bodied World* (Arlington, Vir.: Vandamere Press, 1998); and Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

9 I discuss this issue in my *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 167-69.

10 The most prominent advocate of process theodicy is David Ray Griffin; see his two books, *God, Power, and Evil: A Process Theodicy* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1967), and *Evil Revisited: Reponses and Reconsiderations* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991).

moral evil, but also suggests that natural evil is the result of a fallen world suffering the effects of actions perpetuated by rebellious spiritual beings known in the Christian tradition as Satan, the Devil, or demons (other fallen angels). For process theodicies, the suffering caused by natural disasters (natural evil) is an unavoidable outcome of the way that the world is, and in this regard overlaps with cosmic dualist or primordial chaos responses to the problem of evil.

How might disability perspectives interact with freewill theodicies? I suggest that disability approaches may gravitate away from versions of the freewill defence involving spirit beings and toward those which emphasize human freedom. The chief concern with locating the blame for evil on a primordial fall of angels is that this kind of speculative theodicy does little to either motivate or inform our present engagement with disability and the issues it raises.

The other side of this rationale is also why disability perspectives might be drawn toward the freewill defence: that it rightly focuses on all of the ways in which human freedom exacerbates the experience of disability. Yet disability advocates caution against the traditional association of freedom and evil in this case. This is because as traditionally articulated, the various amendments of the freewill defence have been called on to either justify why disabilities happen to people with them (i.e., because of their sin, carelessness, or irresponsibility), or to enable a sort of resigned posture in the face of human evils (e.g., of wars and its consequences).

However, a disability perspective would insist that the freewill defence should not be interpreted only at the level of if and how it may relate to *individuals* with disabilities. Rather there is a social dimension to disability, as signalled earlier in our working definition of disability.

In this wider framework, the suffering experienced by people with intellectual or physical impairments is in some cases aggravated by and in other cases fully derived from the social, economic, and political structures that impinge on their lives.[11] Evil in this perspective originates systemically and structurally from the ableism that discriminates, excludes, and oppresses people with disabilities.[12]

The freewill theodicy rightly calls attention to the role of creaturely freedom in causing and perpetuating evil, not in terms of people with disabilities receiving what is due for their sins, but in terms of identifying the social

11 For explication of these themes, see Hanoch Livneh, 'On the Origins of Negative Attitudes toward People with Disabilities', in Robert P. Marinelli and Arthur E. Dell Orto, eds., *The Psychological and Social Impact of Disability*, 3rd ed. (New York: Springer, 1991), 181-98, and Asiah Mason, et al., 'Prejudice toward People with Disabilities', in Jean Lau Chin, ed., *The Psychology of Prejudice and Discrimination*, vol. 4, *Disability, Religion, Physique, and Other Traits* (Westport, Conn., and London: Praeger, 2004), 51-92.

12 Ableism is manifest in the belief of the majority nondisabled in their superiority, and it privileges the nondisabled. Society is culpable in discrimination against those with disabilities as ableism operates individually, culturally and institutionally. See Fiona Kumari Campbell's recent *Contours of Ableism: The Production of Disability and Abledness* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

dynamics that cause harm and suffering in the lives of those with disabilities. When put in this way, however, evil is neither merely 'explained' nor 'justified'; rather, the sources of evil are named in order that the status quo can be addressed and dismantled. And this must be the collaborative work of both people with and without disabilities.

3. Soul-making Theodicy

A third type of response to the problem of evil has been called the 'soul-making theodicy'. Given this label by John Hick,[13] the basic outline actually is traced back to the early church father, Irenaeus of Lyons, and emphasizes that evil has been (at least) allowed by God because of its formative capacities for the development of moral virtues. Thus within the divine scheme of things, evil is soul-shaping: it produces that kind of virtuous character that comes about only when people persevere through the suffering and tragedy.

The main questions with this Irenaean theodicy from a disability perspective are threefold. First, whose souls are being made and why? Why is it that in this model, it is generally thought that the souls of people with disabilities are assumed to be in need of shaping?

Second, even if it is not assumed that disabilities are designed to shape the souls of people with them, nevertheless this model presumes an instrumental approach to disability; and in this case, the lives of people with disabilities become the means through which 'nondisabled' souls can be bettered. Without denying the formative value of experiences of suffering, a disability perspective would caution against instrumentalizing the pain and suffering of a select group of people for the gains of others. Even if not specifically put this way, this is how the rhetoric of the soul-making theodicy is interpreted by people with disabilities.[14]

Finally, the question arises from a disability perspective which also plagues theodicies in general: are *all* experiences of disability (in particular) and evil (in general) soul-making? Are there not wholly gratuitous evils which defy any efforts to be rendered meaningful, even for those who believe that some experiences of disability and suffering can be virtue-forming?

4. Christological Response

The last type of response to the problem of evil is the recent articulation in specifically Christian theological circles of God as entering into the suffering of the world, especially but not only in the cross of Jesus Christ. Although with roots deep in the theological tradition, this 'suffering God' view has

13 John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (1966; reprint, London: Fontana, 1968), part III.

14 Grace M. Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 260, raises a parallel question about how the 'we' who learn from suffering are often the 'paradigmatically white, wealthy, highly privileged, and often male philosophers of religion.' My point is to question how 'we' nondisabled folk can so easily lay the burden of educating the human race on folk with disabilities.

been revived since the appearance of Jürgen Moltmann's *The Crucified God*, and is currently gaining widespread adherence in theology-and-science circles.[15] What is attractive about this proposal is its admitting the intractability of the problem of evil, while yet insisting that God is not removed from our suffering but has entered into and embraced such in God's own life.

On the one side, disability perspectives will welcome such a theodicy insofar as it neither stigmatizes the experiences of suffering connected with disability nor marginalizes people because of their disabilities. On the other side, as with theodicies of the primordial chaos (above) and even amidst the insistence that the 'suffering God' is not a weak deity but a strong survivor, there are those who would question whether or not such a motif is sufficiently consoling for those who labour under the pain and tragedy that accompany the experience of some disabilities.

5. The problem of evil and the social context

Before proceeding, two summary comments are in order. First, as may be intuited from the foregoing, disability is difficult to categorize with regard to the problem of evil. On the one hand, the sufferings related to disability are in many cases classifiable under 'natural evil' insofar as they may be results of the workings of nature; on the other hand, the social character of disability also means that much of its attendant sufferings come under the category of 'moral evil'. Beyond these, however, certain congenital disabilities—not Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, which is clearly related to human responsibility, but genetically or chromosomally related syndromes like trisomy 21 (Down syndrome)—are neither merely natural nor moral evils in terms of their etiologies.

For theistic traditions, of course, this raises the theodicy question in earnest: how can an omnibenevolent and omnipotent God allow such evils in the world? Yet the answer 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, God's not allowing the trisomic mutation would be God's not allowing the appearance of precisely that person. There may be no way, in this case, to eradicate the disability without eliminating the person.[16] I will return to this question in the conclusion.

The second observation is that, as is already clear, disability scholarship has long insisted on defining the experience of disability, including any suffering and evil that might be involved, in social terms. In this framework, disability perspective highlights the social and political character of the nature of

15 See Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, trans. John Bowden and R. A. Wilson (New York: Harper & Row, 1974), and John Polkinghorne, ed., *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis* (Grand Rapids, and Cambridge, UK: Eerdmans, 2005).

16 Stanley Hauerwas makes exactly this point in his 'Marginalizing the "Retarded"', in Flavian Dougherty, ed., *The Deprived, the Disabled, and the Fullness of Life* (Wilmington, Del.: Michael Glazier, Inc., 1984), 67-105, esp. 69.

evil often absent in able-ist discussions of theodicy. Evil is neither a spiritual problem to be solved by a proper theology (or theodicy) nor an individual problem to be borne by people who embraced the soul-making character of their experiences. Rather, there is an irreducible social and relational aspect to all human experience, the experience of disability not exempted.[17] If so, then any theodicy that disregards this social and relational dimension cannot speak convincingly into the disability community.

It may be that when all is said and done, disability perspectives can only point toward an eschatological resolution for the unresolved challenges for theodicy (see further below). On the other hand, people with disabilities cannot only wait for God's eschatological response, and in that case, the questions and categories of traditional philosophy of religion need to be revised in order to take disability perspectives into account.

III Disability and Religious Epistemology: Retrieving/Redeeming Subjugated Knowledges

At this point in our dialogue between disability studies and the philosophy of religion, it is worthwhile to focus more intentionally on the epistemological question of how and why disability perspectives make a difference in philosophy of religion. What justifies the argumentative force of disability experiences here? I suggest that disability perspectives contribute significantly to the chorus of postmodern voices resisting the Enlightenment and Eurocentric hegemony in traditional philosophy of religion. In contrast to the traditional emphases on the *if, how*, or *what* of religious experience, postmodern and disability approaches focus instead on the *so what* and *so that* questions.

To be more precise, building on the preceding discussion, I argue that the experiences of people with various sensory or mental limitations call into question the conventional categories and assumptions of philosophy of religion; they also supplement religious knowledge through insights largely unavailable to nondisabled epistemic viewpoints, and finally, they engage other modes of knowing than those dominant in traditional philosophical reflection. The following explicates each of these claims.

1. New approaches to Philosophy of Religion

To begin, I note that the experience of disability brings to the fore new categories and assumptions to the task of philosophy of religion. We have already seen these movements at work in our discussion of the theodicy question above. To press home this point, I call attention to the work of Christian theologian, Nancy Eiesland.[18] Drawing

17 John Swinton, 'Constructing Persons: Macmurray and the Social Construction of Disability', in David Fergusson and Nigel Power, eds., *John Macmurray: Critical Perspectives* (New York Peter Lang, 2002), 239-47.

18 Nancy L. Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1994).

from her lifelong experience of disability (with a form of degenerative bone disease), Eiesland suggests, for example, that what people with disabilities like hers need is not a miraculous cure or healing but a more just, inclusive, and hospitable world. In fact, in response to the idea that she would be made whole in heaven, Eiesland says, 'having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God. My disability has taught me who I am and who God is.'[19]

In contrast, then, to traditional philosophy of religion's focus on the possibility (or not) of miracles, a disability approach to the topic highlights instead a liberating God (the central theme of Eiesland's theology and philosophy of disability). Whereas traditional philosophy of religion has been perennially devoted to explicating the attribute of divine omnipotence, Eiesland's disability perspective identifies instead the 'disabled God':

> …I had waited for a mighty revelation of God. But my epiphany bore little resemblance to the God I was expecting or the God of my dreams. I saw God in a sip-puff wheelchair, that is, the chair used mostly by quadriplegics enabling them to maneuver by blowing and sucking on a strawlike device. Not an omnipotent, self-sufficient God, but neither a pitiable, suffering servant. In this moment, I beheld God as a survivor, unpitying and forthright. I recognized the incarnate Christ in the image of those judged 'not feasible', 'unemployable', with 'questionable quality of life'. Here was God for me.[20]

And finally, Eiesland's disability viewpoint brings the philosophy of beauty (aesthetics) back into dialogue with philosophy of religion, albeit through the most unexpected of sources: that of the disabled body:

> Most people with disabilities see our bodies not as signs of deviance or deformity, but as images of beauty and wholeness. We discern in our bodies, not only the ravages of injustice and pain, but also the reality of surviving with dignity.[21]

In each of these ways, the disability perspective re/introduces treasures old and new—justice, liberation, and beauty—to the task of philosophy of religion.

2. New perspectives

I suggest in addition that disability perspectives supplement religious knowledge through insights that are largely unavailable to the nondisabled. This is evident, for example, in the work of John Hull, a British theologian who became totally blind.[22] In learning to read the Bible again from a non-sighted perspective, Hull came to 'see' that the

19 Nancy Eiesland, 'Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities', *Impact* 14/3 (2001-2002), 2-3 and 35, quotation from 2.

20 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 89.

21 Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 115.

22 John M. Hull, *In the Beginning There Was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible* (Harrisburg, Penn.: Trinity Press International, 2001).

Bible is written by sighted persons, and this explains why the majority of its readers do not question the sighted assumptions behind many of the metaphors that equate blindness with ignorance, unbelief, lostness, unworthiness, or despair. Further, a non-sighted perspective is able to retrieve and reappropriate many of the blind characters in the biblical narrative and focus instead on the full range of human issues revealed through these lives rather than reduce them to flat identities dominated by their blindness.

Last but not least, a non-sighted reading of the Bible recognizes Jesus' tactile or 'hands-on' approach to people as well as his willingness to undergo blindness (through being blindfolded during the passion) for the sake of experiencing solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. Hull concludes that God 'himself' is beyond sightedness or blindness; rather, a close reading of the Bible from a non-sighted point of view reveals that God is not only at home in darkness but also is active amidst the darkness to accomplish his purposes.

3. Other modes of knowing

Hull's proposals are not easily verifiable except through the experience of non-sightedness. That is why I have identified his epistemic viewpoint as one that supplements insights otherwise unavailable to 'normal' epistemic processes. This leads also to my third claim: that disability experiences engage other modes of knowing than those dominant in traditional philosophical reflection. Here, I am talking not only about how non-sighted perspectives can supplement sighted ones; rather, I want to call attention to non-cognitive and non-rational modes of knowing that are more or less absent in philosophy of religion discussions, but are prevalent in the lives of people with severe or profound intellectual disabilities.

My own interests in disability studies, motivated in part through growing up with a brother with a moderate form of intellectual disability, has focused on the religious knowing of people without even the 'basic beliefs' identified by some philosophers of religion.[23] I am concerned here with the connections between how people with intellectual disabilities know in general, and what that means for religious epistemology. In the case of those with severe or profound retardation, how can what they know even be determined, and who can or should speak on behalf of the intellectually disabled?

Amidst this set of questions and others like them, time spent with people with intellectual disabilities soon reveals that there are modes of knowing in operation that may either precede or transcend the intellect, or both.[24] Rather than a rationalist episte-

23 Here, I am referring to the school of Reformed epistemology; see, e.g., Dewey J. Hoitenga, Jr., *Faith and Reason from Plato to Plantinga: An Introduction to Reformed Epistemology* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), esp. ch. 7.

24 Put in philosophical terms, Blaise Pascal said that, 'The heart has its reasons, of which reason knows nothing'; cp. William J. Wainwright, *Reason and the Heart: A Prolegomenon to a Critique of Passional Reason* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995).

mology or a propositionalist form of communication, people across the spectrum of intellectual disabilities engage the world and their significant others through affective, embodied, and relational forms of knowing. The difference in the cases of severe and profound disabilities is that these may be the only forms of knowing, but none of this is registered by ableist perspectives.

The result is not mysticism, as traditionally discussed in philosophy of religion texts—at least not in most cases—but simply the foregrounding of these basic modes of affective, embodied, and relational knowing that have been generally overlooked in traditional philosophy of religion. More specifically, then, if people with intellectual disabilities do not depend primarily on cognitive modes of knowing, then their religious knowing will also be similarly independent.

In this framework, we come to see that the divine or transcendent is mediated through the 'ordinary' forms of affective, embodied, and relational experiences that are operative in the background of all human knowing.[25] And whereas discussions of religious epistemology in traditional philosophy of religion may be preoccupied with questions related to the evidential reliability of or justification for truth claims, the religious epistemology of people with intellectual disabilities will be more focused instead on affective and embodied aspects of that which is good, beautiful, and even true. What emerge are divergent perspectives on received questions (and answers) which most traditional discussions in religious epistemology have not taken into account.

4. Disability perspectives

These examples drawn from the experiences of people with physical, sensory, and intellectual disabilities lead to the following two summary remarks. First, the religious knowledge of people with disabilities has been understandably marginalized in philosophy of religion simply because they have not been involved in such discussions. Now, although this situation is gradually changing, it remains true that the case needs to be made for securing rather than marginalizing disability perspectives from the philosophy of religion roundtable. Ableist resistance will dismiss disability voices as just another politically correct imposition on an existing conversation.

Yet if all knowledge is political in some respect (and no knowledge is non-political),[26] then such ableist assumptions need to be questioned and this can only be done from within the experience of disability that has traditionally been relegated to the underside of history. And the emphasis needs to be on disability *perspectives* (in the plural) since, as should be clear from the preceding, there is no one or

25 I expand on this in my *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 180-91; see also the literature cited there.

26 As argued by Michael Schillmeier, 'Othering Blindness—On Modern Epistemological Politics', *Disability and Society* 21:5 (2006), 471-84.

essential disability experience;[27] rather, there are various kinds of disabilities, and each voice needs to be heard on its own terms.

Second, with the emergence of disability epistemologies in philosophy of religion, the focus shifts from the merits or demerits of religious beliefs and their evidential reliability to a discussion of the hope, attitudes, and affections related to religious life. Some religious epistemologists are being more sensitive to these matters,[28] although most discussions of religious epistemology remain absorbed with the traditional questions related to the cognitive and rational aspects of religious experience. Far from rejecting the important discussions about faith and reason in philosophy of religion, disability perspectives require that faith is understood not just in terms of cognitively held beliefs, but as pervasive over the many domains of human experience.

This much wider epistemological spectrum means that disability perspectives suggest a third way between or beyond the debate between advocates of a pre-theoretical (mystical) religious experience on the one side and proponents of a religious experience that is linguistically and textually mediated on the other. While religious knowledge remains predominantly mediated by a tradition, yet in cases where such knowing is not cognitively dependent, there are alternative forms of engagement through which people can and do come to embody the true, the good, and the beautiful.

IV Disability, Death, and the Afterlife: Reappropriating Visions of Eternity

So far we have seen that disability perspectives can help retrieve subjugated epistemologies and reinvigorate the philosophical discussion. In this section, I wish to invoke disability viewpoints to explore discussions about death and the afterlife in philosophy of religion.

From a disability perspective, western discussions about the possibility and mode of the afterlife are just as problematic as eastern religious and philosophical views regarding karmic reincarnation. Further, traditional philosophical debates regarding the retention of personal identity in the afterlife are especially convoluted when viewed from the standpoints of the wide range of intellectual and physical disabilities, not only in terms of congenital conditions, but also in terms of how human lives are shaped over time by capacities, environments, and relationships. Finally, traditional individualistic notions of heaven and hell, salvation and damnation, are also problematic when disability perspectives are factored into the conversation.

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27 This pluralism applies both to the spectrum of physical and intellectual disabilities; see, e.g., Karen Fiser, 'Philosophy, Disability, and Essentialism', in Lawrence Foster and Patricia Herzog, *Defending Diversity: Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives on Pluralism and Multiculturalism* (Amherst, Mass.: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994), 83-101.

28 See Nicholas Wolterstorff, 'Religious Epistemology', in William J. Wainwright, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 245-71, esp. 246-47.

In examining each of these issues briefly, I will argue that the human experience of disability upsets traditional formulations in philosophy of religion and encourages philosophers (and disabilities scholars) to look for other resources within the discourses of philosophy and religion to fashion alternative eschatological scenarios that will be, in turn, more inclusive of the experiences of persons with disabilities in the here and now.[29]

Traditionally, three major questions regarding the afterlife have received the bulk of the attention: First, is there or is there not an afterlife? This question has been especially persistent since the Enlightenment and its attendant materialistic, naturalistic, and positivistic worldviews. Second, if there is an afterlife, what is the relationship between what has traditionally been labelled the human soul and the body? On this question, the traditional Platonic dualism between soul and body has been more recently challenged by monistic, emergentist, and non-reductive physicalist construals of the mind-body relationship. This leads to the third question: what is the nature of the body in the afterlife? Especially in the Christian discussions in the philosophy of religion, the doctrine of the resurrection of the body has been the subject of extensive consideration. I will take up the first question before dealing with the latter two.

From a disability perspective, the question about whether or not there is an afterlife induces mixed responses. On the one hand, people with disabilities come from a wide spectrum of religious and philosophical positions, and for those who are drawn to materialism or naturalism in various respects, the idea of an afterlife is no more coherent than for nondisabled people with similar views. Then there are also those with disabilities who cannot bear the thought of 'more of the same' in terms of 'living' eternally with their disability conditions.[30] On the other hand, many people with disabilities, including most who are religious, have hoped for and believed in an afterlife in which they are free from their disabilities. For them, to even question the possibility of the afterlife is to question ultimate (cosmic and divine) justice. From this point of view, the injustice they have experienced in this life—whether it be the result of bad luck (chance mutations producing congenital disabilities) or moral irresponsibility—will be vindicated in the next.

This same rationale renders less attractive notions of reincarnation derived from Eastern religious and philosophical traditions, the major alternative presented in traditional philosophy of religion discussions on the afterlife. If reincarnation is driven by karma, then either bad karma in a previous life has produced the present life with disability, or the present life with disability puts one at a disadvantage of producing good karma for the next life, or both. The hope of people with disabilities in general, then, is

29 The following expands my chapter on eschatology in *Theology and Down Syndrome*, ch. 9.

30 Brian Davies, *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 311-12, touches briefly on this matter.

dominated by visions of an afterlife in which the challenges associated with their conditions will be no more.

But if people desire an afterlife free from their disabilities, then the second and third questions regarding the nature of the afterlife in philosophy of religion become pertinent. For people with disabilities, however, these questions about personal identity expose a different set of concerns. For some people with physical disabilities, there is no question that the belief in the resurrection means nothing less than a fully capable and whole body.

For others with various types of sensory and physical disabilities, things may not be so simple. For example, if people who are members of Deaf culture anticipate, 'when we get to heaven, the signing will be tremendous!' what does that mean for hearing members in the afterlife?[31] How will the congenitally blind, who have learned to 'see' with their hands and ears,[32] be given the beatific vision? Will people who have lived most of their lives with prostheses be resurrected with what has become, for all intents and purposes, an integral aspect of their identity?[33] In fact, if Jesus' resurrected body retained the impairments in his hands, side, and feet, is that not suggestive that the resurrected bodies of people with disabilities will also retain signs of their impairments in the world to come? This is exactly how some people with disabilities think they will recognize their patron saints, through the presence of impairments through which they 'earned' their sainthood.[34]

These are questions about the continuity and discontinuity between the present life and the afterlife: if the discontinuity is too great, the sense of personal identity is threatened; if the continuity is too great, then the discontinuity posited between the present finite body and the anticipated resurrected body is undermined.

This question of continuity and discontinuity also presents itself, as already noted, with regard to people with intellectual disabilities. Parallel to the question about what happens to those who die as infants, with what bodies and what kind of personal identities will these people be resurrected in the afterlife? The major difference is that for the severely and profoundly disabled, some will die with adult bod-

31 See Roger Hitching, *The Church and Deaf People: A Study of Identity, Communication and Relationships with Special Reference to the Ecclesiology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Milton Keynes, UK, and Waynesboro, Ga.: Paternoster, 2004), passim.

32 Gunnar Karlsson, 'The Experience of Spatiality for Congenitally Blind People: A Phenomenological-Psychological Study', *Human Studies* 19 (1996), 303-30.

33 E.g., as explored in Marquard Smith and Joanna Morra, eds., *The Prosthetic Impulse: From a Posthuman Present to a Biocultural Future* (London and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006).

34 See the discussion of Saint Margaret of Castello, a limped, hunched, blind, and dwarfed woman who accomplished over 200 miracles and was beatified in 1609, as reflected on through the life of a man with cerebral palsy, in Robert Orsi, '"Mildred, is it fun to be a cripple?": The Culture of Suffering in Mid-Twentieth-Century American Catholicism', in Thomas J. Ferraro, ed., *Catholic Lives, Contemporary America* (Durham, NC, and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 19-64.

ies but undeveloped minds.[35] Another no less challenging scenario involves the resurrection of those who suffer brain damage and/or the loss of memory and yet survive for many years before death.[36] Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the question of personal identity relates to people with chromosomal variations which are what might be called identity-constitutive, such as trisomy 21 (Down syndrome). For these, 'Could someone imagine their daughter with Down's syndrome as being her true self in the new heaven and new earth without some manifestation of her condition?'[37]

In each of these cases, and many others, personal identity is understood not only in terms of cognitive self-consciousness, but (as seen in our earlier discussions on epistemology) in terms of bodily structures, affective dispositions, and interpersonal relations. On these issues, reflections on the afterlife pose other questions than just those related to the mind-body problem, or *if* there will an embodied existence.

But it is precisely the interpersonal and inter-relational aspects of identity foregrounded by disability experiences that raise the final and perhaps most important set of questions for philosophical reflections on the afterlife. There are at least two aspects to the issues involved. On the one hand, there is the question about the deep interpersonal and inter-subjective bonds that often develop between people with severe and profound disabilities and their caregivers.[38] To be sure, all people are interdependent on others in significant ways. However, the intense dependence in these specific cases form, shape, and irrevocably mark the identities of both those with disabilities and their caregivers. If such relationships are severed in the afterlife, it is difficult to conceive of how continuity is maintained for these persons.

On the other hand, we have already mentioned that the suffering of people with disabilities is often socially constructed. Beyond issues of social injustice, however, there are also issues related to the discrimination, marginalization, and exclusion perpetuated at the interpersonal level. From a disability perspective, eschatological vindication in the afterlife does not necessarily have to take the form of punitive assessments against their tormentors. At the same time, the experiences of persecution suffered by people with

35 Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1990), 61-69.

36 The most highlighted case, although by no means the only type of memory loss situation, is Alzheimer's disease. David Keck, *Forgetting Whose We Are: Alzheimer's Disease and the Love of God* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996), suggests that God is the rememberer or historian whose eschatological salvation consists in preserving and restoring to creatures our memories of being the beloved people of God.

37 Cited in Vinay Samuel and Chris Sugden, eds. 'Biblical and Theological Reflections on Disability', in *Mission as Transformation: A Theology of the Whole Gospel* (Oxford: Regnum, 1998), 429-37, quotation from 435.

38 This involves parents and children, as well as spouses. But they could also emerge in professional relationships between caregivers and their clients. For philosophical reflection from the caregiver point of view, see Barbara Hillyer, *Feminism and Disability* (Norman, Okla.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1993).

disabilities cannot be overlooked. This means that the final reconciliation will include a social dimension in which those with disabilities will be reconciled with their nondisabled oppressors.[39] Not coincidentally, I suggest, Jesus' parable of the eschatological banquet included the blind, lame, and crippled (Lk. 14:13, 21), just as they were, rather than only after they had been healed.

Ultimately, justice, at least in the form of inclusion, must prevail if meaning is to be found in lives previously deemed unworthy of serious consideration. In this way, traditional discussions of heaven, hell, and the afterlife will factor in the complex webs of relationships that bind together people with disabilities and those who have wronged them.

In this discussion, I have refrained from postulating too many concrete proposals for thinking about the afterlife in disability perspective. Rather, my strategy has been to suggest questions derived from disability experiences that have not been posed in traditional discussions on the afterlife in philosophy of religion. In the end, asking the right questions about the afterlife has implications for how we conduct business in the present life.

If we think that the afterlife is a 'magical' fix for all the challenges posed 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 in life and await God's eschatological healing for their lives. Yet this assumes that the task of responding to the issues of disability belongs to God, and it also assumes that disability is primarily (perhaps only) an individual affair.

I have maintained throughout this essay, however, that there is an intractable social dimension to disability, and how we think about the afterlife shapes our vision for the present one. If life in the hereafter manifests the divine and cosmic justice we all hope for, and also includes people with disabilities in a sense just as they are—see, for example, the parable of the eschatological banquet at which the blind, lame, and deaf are included (Luke 14:1-24)—then such notions of justice and inclusion should also guide our present efforts.

V Conclusion: Enabling a Performative Philosophy of Religion

My goal in this essay has been to interrogate traditional approaches to philosophy of religion from a disability studies perspective. We have focused our attention on issues in theodicy, religious epistemology, and questions of death and the afterlife, and used them as springboards to register disability perspectives on philosophy of religion topics. One of the most glaring issues has been the absence of disability perspectives in traditional philosophy of religion.

39 For a discussion of the many layers of justice in disability perspective, see Jeffrey C. Kirby, 'Disability and Justice: A Pluralistic Account', Social Theory and *Practice* 30:2 (2004), 229-46; for consideration of the social dimension of justice in eschatological perspective, see Miroslav Volf, 'The Final Reconciliation: Reflections on the Social Dimension of the Eschatological Transition', *Modern Theology* 16:1 (2000), 91-113.

It might even be said that one of the 'evils' of theodicy has been the ignorance, neglect, and marginalization of disability voices. In this case, the first steps to any viable theodicy will need to retrieve and include such disability perspectives. As in the wider philosophical, political, and scholarly issues, the mantra of people with disabilities, 'Nothing about us without us!' applies also to the philosophy of religion.[40]

When disability perspectives are recorded, however, the discussion is redirected toward what I call a praxis-oriented philosophy of religion.[41] By this, I mean that even granting the speculative moment in philosophy of religion, disability perspectives will insist that such moments in the long run will need to invigorate the moral, social, and political practices that facilitate the healing of human life. Such healing is, arguably, the goal of all philosophical activity which loves wisdom and of religious activity which seeks to incarnate love. In other words, *philosophia*—the love of wisdom—in disability perspective cannot be neutral regarding the bringing about the things of which wisdom speaks: goodness, truth, beauty, and justice. Put alternatively, in philosophy of religion perspective, philosophical reflection is sustained by that which religion in its own way seeks to realize: love—the love of God, the love for God, and the love of human beings for one another.

When brought together in disability perspective, wisdom and love are neither merely theoretical notions nor theological speculations; rather, they become the stuff by which philosophical reflection is supposed to be transformed so that the world might be changed. In the end, then, perhaps disability perspectives will not only destabilize traditional formulations in philosophy of religion, but ultimately serve to rehabilitate philosophy of religion in ways that enable the proper performance of wisdom to manifest the good, true, and beautiful that is the stuff of authentic spirituality and piety.[42]

40 James I. Charlton, *Nothing about Us without Us: Disability, Oppression and Empowerment* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

41 John Swinton, *Raging with Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007).

42 This article is a shorter version of "Disability and the Love of Wisdom: De-forming, Re-forming, and Per-forming Philosophy of Religion", *Ars Disputandi: The Online Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 9 (2009): 54-71, reprinted with permission from the editors of the journal. Readers interested in following up the issues raised here should consult the much more extensive references documented in the *Ars Disputandi* essay. Thanks to Thomas Schirrmacher for inviting its reprinting, and to my GA, Timothy Lim Teck Ngern, for his help in ensuring the cohesiveness of the article through the process of my shortening it.