CHAPTER 66

Disability and Suffering

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on how disability is and ought to be related to discussions of suffering in contemporary philosophy of religion. One might expect a philosophical discussion of such matters to begin with careful definitions.

X is a disability *if and only if* _____.

Y undergoes suffering *if and only if* _____.

Such expectations will not be satisfied. Defining the category of disability is quite complicated. The narrower our concept of disability, the less useful it will be for helping us think about the breadth of human experience, including suffering. If we aim for our concept and its use to be *ameliorative* (i.e., helping reveal the target concept that we *should be using* rather than just the descriptive concept that *is used*), it will be best to not rigidly limit the scope of the content too soon. The Americans with Disabilities Act intentionally defines a disability in a broad manner so as to include those who are "perceived to have a disability". Given that the ADA's primary purpose is to protect against discrimination, it casts its concept in a way to include those who may be treated in problematic ways because others think, rightly or wrongly, that they have a disability. We appreciate this approach, since we think it is vital that talking about suffering and the problem of evil includes the practical. That is, we think our discussion of suffering should better prepare us to actually address or minimize suffering. The mere theoretical discussion can become a kind of buck-passing, especially if the harms of suffering are social/contextual. We do not want to use a philosophical definition that could encourage us to engage in the philosophical method of counterexamples rather than motivate us to seek to improve our world and work to alleviate the harms experienced by our neighbors and within our communities.

In the first major section, "Avoidance", we briefly canvas what contemporary philosophy of religion has said about disability and suffering. (There is a reason this treatment can be brief.) We identify a dominant approach to disability in philosophical work on suffering and the problem of evil: what we call "the avoidance approach". In the next section, "Confronting Avoidance", we extend arguments against the avoidance approach. In the final section of the chapter, "Disabling Philosophy of Religion", we then explore some of the positive roles we think disability *should* play in philosophy of religion. Given the constraints of this volume, this final section must unfortunately be programmatic. But we

think that there are important issues regarding disability that philosophers of religion and philosophical theologians should be addressing, and hope that this chapter can encourage them to.

AVOIDANCE

In this section, we describe what we will refer to as "the avoidance approach" to the relationship between disability and evil. This approach is often, though not universally, adopted in many treatments of the problem of evil. It is what people, especially the laity but also many scholars, often initially think the relationship between disability and the problem of evil is.[1]

Avoidance comes in two reinforcing forms. The first way of avoiding something is passive; one avoids something by simply not addressing or thinking about it. Issues pertaining to disability are remarkably absent from contemporary philosophical work on the problem of evil, presumably because many philosophers of religion tend to avoid writing on disability at all. On those occasions when it does come up, what is often assumed, without any argument, is that disability inherently involves suffering, and thus that disability is an evil that needs to be explained in order for belief in God's goodness to remain compatible with the existence of evil. This often leads to the second form of avoidance: stigmatizing avoidance. In this case, because disability is assumed to be a deterrent to flourishing, we assume that disability is something that ought to always be avoided as much as possible. We continue to avoid considering that disability could be neutral or positive precisely because of the way that disability is stigmatized.

We begin with the first form of avoidance. Peter van Inwagen's *The Problem of Evil*, based on his Gifford lectures, does not contain a single mention of disability,[2] nor does Mark Scott's *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil*.[3] The recent *Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil* mainly avoids in the first way as well, mentioning disability only twice. Given that estimates of the number of disabled individuals alive in the world range widely but have been as high as 2 billion, this seems surprising. But each mention illustrates the second, stigmatizing, form of avoidance. In the first mention of disability, the editors associate disability with evil: "disabilities and diseases that have deleterious effects on humans and other animals, such as AIDS, Zika, deafness, and blindness, are also natural evils."[4] In the other, John Schellenberg suggests that emotional or intellectual disabilities "from which some humans suffer"[5] could prevent them from being able to form a personal relationship with God.[6] *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views* is similar, explicitly mentioning disability twice, both of which are

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[1]We thank Amy Seymour for this name and helping us have a clearer understanding of the two forms of avoidance.

[2]Peter van Inwagen, *The Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

[3]Mark S. M. Scott, *Pathways in Theodicy: An Introduction to the Problem of Evil* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015).

[4]Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 2.

[5]John L. Schellenberg, "Evil, Hiddenness, and Atheism", in *The Cambridge Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Chad Meister and Paul K. Moser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 112.

[6]In contrast, in the single mention of disability in Laura W. Ekstrom, "A Christian Theodicy", in *The Blackwell Companion to the Problem of Evil*, ed. Justin B. McBrayer and Daniel Howard-Snyder (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), 277, she notes, but only in passing, that "sometimes, quite remarkable abilities are, in fact, accompanied by disorders in other areas. Some savants, for instance, have remarkable mathematical proficiencies while being

negatively valanced.[7] In the introduction, editors Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. list "disabilities such as deafness and blindness"[8] as examples of the natural evils that must be explained in a satisfactory response to the problem of evil. Philip Cary, in his response to Craig's view, describes blindness as an "ontological defect" to illustrate how moral evil is a perversion of free will:

> Moral evil is related to the free will as blindness is related to the eye's power of vision. It certainly can happen, but it is an ontological defect, not the exercise of freedom or any other power.[9]

Richard Swinburne, one of the best-known and most-prolific philosophers of religion, continues this pattern. The central parts of Swinburne's theodicy[10] do not explicitly mention disability, thus illustrating passive avoidance. But specific mentions of disability, as well as his general approach to theodicy, also illustrate stigmatized avoidance. Passive avoidance need not always be problematic, especially in individual texts, as many important issues and groups are often left un-discussed if for no other reason than lack of space. But for something as common for human experience as disability (given that it directly affects over 20 percent of the world's population), it's perplexing that it's so often ignored but then almost always conjoined with stigmaticing avoidance, as we find in Swinburne, that the problem is more profound. Disability is bad and thus is something that we ought to avoid. His claim that "disabilities need to be prevented and cured"[11] illustrates that he thinks they are examples of what Elizabeth Barnes calls "bad-difference".[12] If disabilities are negative states of affairs, then they are among the evils that a theodicy must address.

We could only find three mentions of disability in Swinburne's most thorough treatment of the problem of evil, the aptly titled *Providence and the Problem of Evil*. Each of them is an instance of stigmatizing avoidance. The first comes up in a discussion of suicide: "For some few, the disabled, the only ways of ending life unaided are the processes of starvation which take weeks."[13] The association of disability with suicide is problematic, as has been pointed out by those more familiar with disability tropes.[14] But

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deficient socially and in other areas, and there is striking disproportionate regularly with which the triad of blindness, mental handicap, and musical genius occurs in savant syndrome".

[7]Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr., eds, *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic, 2017). There are potentially two other passing references. In his contribution, William Lane Craig mentions leukemia and a child who loses part of a hand in an accident, both of which could disable. But he doesn't develop either of these examples into a point about disability.

[8]Meister and Dew, *God and the Problem of Evil*, 3.

[9]Phillip Cary, "The Classic Response", in *God and the Problem of Evil: Five Views*, ed. Chad Meister and James K. Dew Jr. (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press Academic 2017), 138.

[10]He intends it as a theodicy, not just a defense (on the usual use of this distinction); see Richard Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), x–xi.

[11]Richard Swinburne, *Revelation: From Metaphor to Analogy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 304. We also take it to be problematic, and evidence of the larger pattern of his not paying attention to how disadvantaged groups are treated, that he thinks that homosexuality is a disability, perhaps also a disease, and likely in principle curable medically (303–5).

[12]Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016); see also the discussion in Stephen M. Campbell and Joseph A. Stramondo, "The Complicated Relationship of Disability and Well-Being", *Kennedy Institute of Ethics Journal* 27, no. 2 (2017): 151–84.

[13]Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 147.

[14]See Michael Bérubé, "Disability and Narrative", *PMLA* 120, no. 2 (2005): 568–76; and Joseph P. Shapiro, *No Pity: People with Disabilities Forging a New Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Random House, 1993).

furthermore, it is simply false that "the disabled", as if this were a uniform class, are only able to successfully end their life in this way.[15] The second mention is when Swinburne uses "help[ing] the handicapped" as a way that prisoners can do good for others, and the third is a passing claim to how "autistic children who have no sense of right or wrong are to that extent incompetent".[16] These comments come across as simply condescending. But more problematically, Swinburne seems confident in making such claims without engaging the literature on the issues. His assumption seems to be that his conclusions are so obvious they need no substantive philosophical defense. These comments can be understood as instances of what Marilyn McCord Adams refers to as "the metaphysical devaluation" of human beings in discussions of the problem of evil.[17] But Swinburne's work can also help us get clear on what we think is problematic with this approach to suffering.

In general, Swinburne claims that it is "good to be of use". After claiming that it is good to have the power to accomplish things, he writes:

> It is a good for us if our experiences are not wasted but are used for the good of others, if they are the means of a benefit which would not have come to others without them, which will at least in part compensate for those experiences. It follows from this insight that it is a blessing for a person if the possibility of his suffering makes possible the good for others of having the free choice of hurting or harming him; and if his actual suffering makes possible the good for others of feeling compassion for him, and of choosing to show or not show sympathy or provide knowledge of others.[18]

While being of use through one's own spontaneous agency or character might be better, the good of being of use is not restricted only to intentional, voluntary actions. It also includes involuntary actions and experiences. So it is good to be of use, even without our consent, if our being used brings about good states of affairs. And, even more explicitly, it is good for a person to be of use even if being of use *is not good for that person.* Swinburne takes this line of argument so seriously that he says it is good for the fawn who dies a painful death in a forest fire in that it provides the opportunity for other deer to avoid such suffering in the future. Now, he does admit that at this point he is not "passing any judgment about whether the good [of being of use] is as great as the bad is bad".[19] But then when he comes back to the good of being of use later in the volume, the caution seems to have fallen away. "It is a great good for the agent if he can help someone who needs help. He is privileged to have the opportunity to be of use and blessed if he takes it"[20] and that one person's suffering can be justified by goods that go to another.[21] What

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[15]For two useful introductions to the immense literature here, see Robert F. Weir, ed., *Physician-assisted Suicide* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997) and Joanne Lynn, ed., *By No Extraordinary Means: The Choice to Forgo Life-Sustaining Food and Water* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989).

[16]Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 225. If the idea is that the agents in question don't satisfy the relevant epistemic condition on moral agency, it's hard to see what actual work autism is doing. And given the history of both infantilizing autistics and denying their agency, the pairing of autism and childhood here is problematic.

[17]Marilyn McCord Adams, *Horrendous Evils and the Goodness of God* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 86.

[18]Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 103.

[19]Ibid.

[20]Ibid., 167.

[21]See ibid., 227.

makes these sufferings good is their good consequences, and they are justified so long as (i) "the goods that they make possible are at least a tiny bit better than the bad states necessary for them are bad"[22] and (ii) so long as God does not wrong the person being used. But it can be the good of being of use that benefits the person who God makes (or allows) to suffer. And even that is not needed: "even if the suffering is on balance bad for the sufferer, nevertheless our creator, if he has given us many other good things, has the right to use us to a limited extent for the sake of some good to others."[23] The primary limit to how much a person can themselves suffer is "the safety barrier of death".[24]

We have a number of interconnected concerns about Swinburne's theodicy. Swinburne justifies the good of being of use by appeal to the Christian scriptures[25] but is notably silent on its condemnation of those who say, "let us do evil so that good may come".[26] Additionally, it can lead to an instrumentalization of individuals where their suffering is the means to others' goods. Presumably, he would object to our claim that his approach involves a problematic instrumentalization given that he thinks that "all the ways in which the suffering of *A* is beneficial to *B* are also beneficial to *A* – because *A* is privileged to be of use".[27]

Instrumentalizing individuals in the way that Swinburne's view does makes it all too easy to justify various forms of oppression and harm where socially disadvantaged individuals or even classes of people must suffer for the good of those who perpetuate their oppression. In fact, this is exactly what we find in Swinburne's discussion of the good of being of use in chattel slavery.[28] History is full of other such examples beyond those already mentioned: the intentional infection of disabled children with gonorrhea by Henry Heiman, the US military and Atomic Energy Commission giving disabled children radioactive food or calcium to measure radiation exposure, the pattern of abuse and death at the Sonoma State Hospital in California, the widespread intentional infection of the disabled residents of the Willowbrook State School with hepatitis, and so on. As parents of disabled children, both of us have been told that the reason God allowed our children to be born disabled is to teach us patience. There is certainly a cultural assumption that disability is bad, and it is an assumption that Swinburne endorses; but it is often thought that God is justified in allowing (or even causing) it so that other individuals, who themselves do not have disabilities, can benefit in some way. Disabled individuals become means to others' goods in a way that reflects the long history of undervaluing disabled lives. Writing in a different context, one related to suffering rather than disability, Nick Wolterstorff describes this kind of instrumentalization as "repulsive".[29] And we agree. Swinburne might not explicitly endorse the implications we have drawn from his limited discussion of disability, but his account provides a grounding for these claims.

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[22]Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 223.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Ibid., 232.

[25]See ibid., 247.

[26]He could claim that this passage applies only to humans, and not to God, thereby endorsing a different ethic for God than for creation. See Mark Murphy, *God's Own Ethics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) for one such approach.

[27]Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 241.

[28]See ibid., 245–6.

[29]Nicholas Wolterstorff, *In This World of Wonders: Memoir of a Life of Learning* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2019), 208.

Justifying the good of a disability on the basis of the good of being of use *for others* instrumentalizes disabled individuals, which plausibly is itself an evil. Rather than advancing a successful defense of God's permitting disability, Swinburne's view commits a separate injustice against disabled people by suggesting that their existence *qua disabled* is justified by what they can do for other people.

But in many other cases, this justification of instrumentalization does not work. Consider the Tuskegee Syphilis study or the numerous studies of radiation exposure done on disabled individuals.[30] Is the suffering these individuals undergo justified by the medical progress made as a result of the experimentation? The general consensus seems to be no; medical progress for others is not a sufficient reason for these individuals to have suffered. And if this kind of justification fails on the human-to-human plane, *a fortiori* it will fail on the God-to-human plane, because God's omnipotence will ensure that there is another means by which such progress could be made, absent those individuals suffering. And so, even though Swinburne thinks that God is justified in instrumentalizing humans given that God is their creator, sustainer, and benefactor, we think there is reason to think that God should pursue the good in some other non-instrumentalizing way.

Our concern about instrumentalization is connected to others' criticism of Swinburne's view for failing to adequately ensure that the good goes to the one who suffers.[31] Eleonore Stump, for instance, writes as follows:

> The doctrine of God's providence gives us the nature and purpose of God's rule, and the account of God's goodness shows us constraints on the way he can achieve his purpose. In particular, the notion of God's justice requires that undeserved suffering permitted by God be somehow compensated. Undeserved suffering which is uncompensated seems clearly unjust; but so does suffering compensated only by benefits to someone other than the sufferer [at least, not without their endorsement].[32]

Marilyn Adams suggests a "person-relative" requirement, such that in evaluating suffering we look to how the person who suffers some particular instance of suffering evaluates it: "there is a difference between meanings being recognized and appropriated *by others* and their being recognized and appropriated *by the individual him/herself*."[33] Adams advocates for a person-centered restriction, which she describes as a condition on the defense of suffering horrendous evils. She thinks the benefit of having undergone such suffering must go, in some substantive way, to the individual who suffers by means of the evil being integrated into the whole of that person's life.[34] Taking a person-relative approach, such as Adams suggests, would help avoid stigmatizing avoidance.

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[30]See, for instance, Harriet A. Washington, *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present* (New York: Anchor 2008).

[31]See Adams' discussion of the "person-relative" requirement, discussed later.

[32]Eleonore Stump, "Providence and the Problem of Evil", in *Christian Philosophy*, ed. Thomas Flint (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 65–6; see Eleonore Stump, *Wandering in Darkness: Narrative and the Problem of Suffering* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 221. Stump also addresses disability at considerable length in connection with suffering in Eleonore Stump, *Atonement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), ch. 6.

[33]Adams, *Horrendous Evils*, 81–2.

[34]See ibid., 28. See also Aaron D. Cobb and Kevin Timpe, "Disability and the Theodicy of Defeat", *Journal of Analytic Theology* 5 (2017): 100–20. Swinburne is aware of but doesn't endorse the person-centered restriction (see Swinburne, *Providence and the Problem of Evil*, 230, note 5).

CONFRONTING AVOIDANCE

Thus far we have outlined the way that contemporary discussions of the problem of evil provide concrete examples of passive and stigmatizing avoidance of disability. Disability is avoided in discussion because, we argue, it is *presumed* to be bad and that what makes it bad is sufficiently obvious so as not to require any argument.[35] In this section we will argue that this view of disability is problematic and harmful in at least two ways: it fails to adequately address the *variety* of disabled experiences and disabled persons' testimony, and it distances disability-related suffering from one of its main causes: injustice.

First, the evidence we have about the relationship between disabilities and individual lives is diverse and far more varied than the bad-difference (or related) views permit. Consider, for example, how Ron Amundson argues that there is a good amount of variation about the relationship between bodily states and overall well-being.[36] In fact, he argues the mode of a function (i.e., the means by which it is performed) is *not* determinative of overall functional success. For example, a double-leg amputee may not be able to participate in one form of college basketball, but they need not be precluded from play altogether. A blind individual may not experience particular modes of art appreciation, but that does not mean they are wholly precluded from it. Evidence from developmental biology suggests that "the functional potential of an individual human being is not fixed".[37] But a major argument in thinking that disabilities are always bad states of affairs assumes the mere presence of a disability prevents or severely limits one's ability to function in ways necessary to have a flourishing life. A disability need not preclude forms of successful functioning, even if it alters the mode of that function. And one of the ways we make social systems more just is to create opportunities to recognize and support various forms of functioning conducive to individual flourishing.

The testimony we have from disabled individuals suggests that disability is a complex feature of life, without a particular *necessary* effect on well-being. Studies that seek to measure subjective well-being and disability return a variety of results.[38] Some individuals testify that they do not want to alter their disability or even, in some cases, return to a previous state that did not include their disability.[39] This kind of testimony suggests two things: first, that not all disabilities cause suffering, and second, that some individuals with disabilities (regardless of the suffering they may experience) do not view their disabilities as an evil, even if they do experience suffering as a result of being disabled. Given that we are concerned with individual *suffering*, we should give substantial weight to personal testimony. While we do not think that suffering is a wholly subjective condition (something like, *S* is suffering if and only if *S* thinks *S* is suffering), that does not preclude our thinking that personal testimony does provide substantial (even if defeasible) evidence about one's suffering and/or overall well-being. A well-known case that highlights this is

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[35]This avoidance has been noted both in other scholarly work and experienced by many disabled individuals.

[36]Ron Amundson, "Against Normal Function", *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science Part C: Studies in History and Philosophy of Biological and Biomedical Sciences* 31, no. 1 (2000): 33–53; and Ron Amundson, "Quality of Life, Disability, and Hedonic Psychology", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 40, no. 4 (2010): 374–92.

[37]Ibid., 45.

[38]For a discussion of some of the literature here, see Barnes, *The Minority Body*, especially ch. 4.

[39]See Rebecca Atkinson, "Do I Want My Sight Back?" *The Guardian*, July 17, 2007, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2007/jul/17/healthandwellbeing.health.

that of "Deaf-gain".[40] Deaf-gain is a term that captures the numerous benefits that Deaf individuals cite as arising directly from being deaf: "the biological, social, and cultural implications of being deaf are not automatically defined simply by *loss* but could also be defined by *difference*, and, in some significant instances, as *gain*."[41] Whatever evidence we have about the relationship between deafness and well-being or suffering, the testimony about Deaf-gain must be given proper weight.

Finally, we cannot ignore the way social context may change the relationship between a bodily condition and an individual's suffering. Attending to disabled individuals' testimony reveals a variety of experiences with respect to how the social context affects bodily states and overall well-being. Even an identical condition in two individuals may have widely disparate impacts on well-being, depending on differences in the relevant social and historical contexts. Having a particular form of dyslexia, for example, may cause little to no suffering in a pre-literate social context but have profound challenges for another individual in a literacy-dominated educational setting. What this suggests is not that disability is never associated with suffering but rather that disability's relationship to suffering is far more complex and contextually mediated than the views described in the section on "Avoidance" permit. Additionally, many disabled individuals consider their disability – including its attendant forms of challenge or suffering – a real part of their overall identity.[42]

Thus, we do not need to prove that disability is never linked to, or never causes, suffering. Lots of otherwise good – even important – features of life can cause an individual to suffer. Many individuals who experience discrimination for their gender identity, for example, can contend that this identity is *a* cause of the suffering they experience (in the sense that, counterfactually, had they not had this identity that would not have experienced this suffering). But that does not entail that the condition itself is bad or forms part of that body of evidence that constitutes the problem of evil. Similarly, in cases where there is no moral agent who discriminates, we can see that a feature of personal identity or bodily configuration can cause suffering without *thereby* being bad in itself. Having female reproductive parts can, if one has children, lead to suffering (including but not limited to post-partum depression, tearing and laceration, pain, and so on). But that does not mean that having female reproductive parts is an evil *in need of explanation*.

Consider, too, how philosopher Scott Williams nuances the relationship between disability and horrendous evils.[43] Williams identifies a horrendous-difference disability not by a particular bodily or cognitive configuration *alone* but rather by the conjunction of a certain intrinsic condition that prohibits the fulfillment of a rational, morally good wish. This kind of disability, for Williams, is a horrendous-difference because one *wishes* (rationally and licitly) for a certain function(s) that one lacks due to an

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[40]The best collection here is H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray, eds, *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014); see especially Teresa Blankmeyer Burke, "Armchairs and Stares: On the Privation of Deafness", in *Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity*, ed. H-Dirksen L. Bauman and Joseph J. Murray (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3–22.

[41]Bauman and Murray, *Deaf Gain*, xv.

[42]See Barnes, *The Minority Body*; see also Eli Clare, *Brilliant Imperfection: Grappling with Cure* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), and Shane Clifton, *Crippled Grace: Disability, Virtue Ethics, and the Good Life* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2018).

[43]See Scott Williams, "Horrendous-Difference Disabilities, Resurrected Saints, and the Beatific Vision: A Theodicy", *Religions* 9, no. 52 (2018): 1–13.

impairment that cannot be amended by extrinsic factors.[44] For Williams a disability is a "horrendous-difference" in need of theodicy only in the case where one's wishes are involved and thus the disability exists in a context in which it causes one to doubt whether one's life is on the whole good for one.[45] He goes on to argue persuasively for a variety of ways God might defeat (in Adams' sense of the term) this kind of rational-wish-fulfillment disability – including cases in which the individual retains their disability and other cases in which they do not. Williams also considers cases of severe cognitive disability in which no rational wishes can be presumed, and argues that in some of these cases (ones that parallel the rational-wish cases) the individuals' life will be marked by horrendous evils that are eventually defeated.

Williams makes clear that these subcategories of disability and/or impairment are not representative of the *whole* of disability or impairment. As he notes, "Two individuals with the same kind of impairment relative to human function *F* might experience it differently . . . If an individual with the impairment has sufficient external resources, then he or she might not experience the kind of suffering that the other individual experiences."[46] A disability *can* fall into the category of a horrendous-difference, depending upon the criteria Williams outlines; but it *need not* simply in virtue of being a disability. And in this way, the response of theologians and philosophers to the suffering caused by particular disabilities in particular lives will follow, not a reply based on the *disability* but on the *whole* of the person's experience. We noted in the beginning of this chapter that there is perhaps no unified concept of a disability, and certainly no unified experience of disability. Perhaps we should seek, then, not a unified response within the problem of evil, but an array of diverse responses that respect the complex ways disability intersects with human life.

The relationship between disability and the problem of evil has often been treated primarily as a problem of natural evil. When philosophers talk about disability, it seems that they are primarily referring to conditions that arise naturally and not out of intentional human action (often but not always, for example, genetic or congenital conditions like blindness and Down's Syndrome). Disabilities can certainly be acquired and temporary, but discussions of disabilities in the problem of evil literature focus on them as raising a version of a natural, rather than a moral, problem of evil.[47] The question is often framed in terms of why God would permit these kinds of bodily conditions to exist, again contributing to stigmatized avoidance. This emphasis, we argue, actually contributes to ongoing injustice against disabled individuals. This occurs in at least two ways.

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[44]Williams here relies on the distinction between impairment and disability found in Richard Cross, "Impairment, Normalcy, and a Social Theory of Disability", *Res Philosophica* 93, no. 4 (2016): 693–714.

[45]See ibid., 2.

[46]Ibid., 3.

[47]For example, in Richard Cross, "Aquinas on Physical Impairment: Human Nature and Original Sin", *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 3 (2017): 317–38, in his treatment of Aquinas on physical defects, he notes Aquinas' care to distance such defects from their being consequences of that person's sin. It's certainly the case that disability can be the result of moral evil. This is true not only of acquired disabilities but also of congenital disabilities. Disabling conditions can be caused, for example, by drinking lead-contaminated water, as happened on a wide scale in Flint, Michigan, in the mid-2000s. These cases fall under the moral evil banner not because of the mere fact that they involve a disability (see Elizabeth Barnes, "Valuing Disability, Causing Disability", *Ethics* 125, no. 1 (2014): 88–136), but because of their causal history. And the regular responses to the problem of moral evil could be evoked in response to them.

First, treating disability primarily as a variety of natural evil to be justified deemphasizes the role that humans, and the social and political structures humans create and maintain, play in the evils experienced by disabled individuals. As we noted earlier, social and physical contexts can often determine whether one's functioning – even with an atypical bodily configuration – is successful. Mobility is more limited by the lack of ramps and accessible doorways than by the existence of paralysis. Literacy success is more limited by the lack of resources within school systems than by the mere existence or occurrence of dyslexia. We can imagine numerous other scenarios in which lack of practical resources, as well as persistent forms of ableism and discrimination, contribute substantially to the suffering of a disabled individual. But if the discussion in philosophy of religion centers wholly on the compatibility of disability with *God's* existence, the real social harms – the ones that we have power to change – are diminished in importance.[48]

Terence Tilley argues that one of the problems with theodicies as assertive declarations is they "erase other forms of evil, especially what liberation and political theologians call 'structural evil', patterns of practice such as racism and sexism".[49] On Tilley's argument, when we *reduce* evil to instances of suffering, we also lose the ability to name these other, structural forces as evil. We think that Tilley's argument applies to ableism as well as the racism and sexism he explicitly names. Any treatment of the problem of evil as it relates to disability must consider the systems in place that give rise to both concrete individual suffering (individual acts of hatred, individual experiences of discrimination, etc.) and to broader problems, such as the widespread assumption about disability's relationship to quality of life that prompts our arguments in this chapter.

Second, suggesting that disability is itself an evil in need of explanation implies that disability is *not* a positive contribution to one's identity, and thus not the kind of identity-conferring quality that would persist into resurrected or beatific life. This might be described as a kind of "identity harm", in that it takes a feature important to a group of individuals and suggests that *a priori* this feature cannot be taken to be a meaningful part of one's identity.[50] We are not suggesting that all disabled individuals see their disabilities as contributing positively to their identity, though many do. Indeed, there is diversity within the disabled community about the best way to view the relationship between an individual and their disability: some prefer disability-first or identity-first language ("an autistic person") because they see their autism as a central part of their identity, others prefer person-first language ("a person with autism"). And we do not want to be inadvertently prescriptive, suggesting that individuals *ought* to view their disabilities one way or another. But the view of disabled bodies as natural evils does suggest that one of these views is mistaken. That is, it suggests that one *ought not* to think of one's

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[48]This is one reason that many moral theologians do a better job of addressing disability than do philosophers of religion.

[49]Terrence W. Tilley, "A Trajectory of Positions", in *The Problem of Evil: Eight Views in Dialogue*, ed. N. N. Trakakis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 181.

[50]In saying this, we don't mean to imply that the presence or absence of a disability alters the agent's numerical identity, but rather than disability can and often does play a central role in the individual's self and socially situated understanding. We thus have in mind something like what Hilde Lindemann refers to as the characterization sense of identity: "how the person sees herself and how other people understand her to be" (Hilde Lindemann, *Holding and Letting Go: The Social Practice of Personal Identities* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 4). See her discussion of dismissive forces that can lead to oppressed identities in Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001).

disability as an identity-forming feature. We think this prescriptive view should not be assumed without argument in philosophical and theological discussions of disability.

DISABLING PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

In the previous sections we have suggested that while disability certainly can (partially or wholly) cause human suffering, it is also irreducible to experiences of suffering. In that sense, disability is not a category that can be taken up wholesale in addressing the problem of evil. Not every disability is an evil that needs to be justified: "Disabilities do not count as evidence of evil . . . They don't carry any sense of good or bad within them; they just *are* in the midst of someone's life, and the fullness of that life lends color and shape and meaning to the differences written in the body and the mind."[51] As Eleonore Stump puts the point:

> A disability, like a scar, is neutral in itself. It derives its value from its role in contributing to or detracting from a person's being his true self. And whether it detracts or contributes depends entirely on the way in which a person with a disability weaves the disability into his life. If he does so in such a way that in the end he does not wish that God had done otherwise with respect to him and his disability, then the disability becomes like the scars of the lives of Mary Magdalene and Peter: not something that disfigures the life of the person who has it but rather something which makes that life worthy of celebration.[52]

As with other aspects of complex human experiences, understanding how disabilities relate to concrete human suffering and well-being requires nuance and detail. This is not to say, however, that disabilities even considered very broadly cannot inform how we do philosophy of religion. In this final section, we suggest some ways that philosophy of disability can shape conversations in philosophy of religion.

First, and perhaps most important, philosophy of disability can press philosophy of religion to reckon with the immediate concerns of individuals and communities that are affected by this kind of work. It is irresponsible to assume that when we theorize about the problem of evil, it has no effect on the people about whom we theorize. It is not merely a philosophical puzzle divorced from human experience. Unlike contemporary theology, where liberation theologies require reflection on and engagement with social structures that oppress, conversations in analytic philosophy of religion have tended to ignore the impact of how they are discussed on those they are discussing (e.g., Swinburne).

Despite the presence of liberation theologies, James Cone, for instance, describes White supremacy as "theology's great sin" given that so little contemporary theology engages with issues of race (not to mention class, disability, nationalism).[53] But if theology has sinned by being silent in the face of White supremacy, then contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has as well, given that there seems to be even less discussion of race in philosophy of religion than in theology.[54]

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[51]Hilary Yancey, *Forgiving God* (New York: Faith Words, 2018), 134–5.

[52]Eleonore Stump, *The Image of God: The Problem of Evil and the Problem of Mourning* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 306.

[53]James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy", *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2004): 139–52.

[54]See a number of essays in Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe, eds, *The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion: New Perspectives on Disability, Gender, Race, and Animals* (New York: Routledge, 2019).

Philosophy of religion should do more to address the social structures that harm, oppress, and hold us in our sin – which involves accurately describing and delineating between irreducibly structural sins and evils, and those that involve human will or natural phenomena.[55] We can more effectively address particular instances of structural moral evils only if we have a better account of what structural evil is, rather than reducing the category of moral evils to individual actions, desires, and dispositions. Once we have recognized structural moral evils as something our philosophical reflection needs to address, we will have no excuse for not addressing them.

Given that, as feminists and philosophers of disability have noted, "the philosophical is political",[56] philosophy of religion needs to pay more collective attention to political issues and the ways that our philosophical practices themselves contribute to problematic political structures. This will require noting how the patterns and practices of our scholarship can not only reinforce but also hide social realities that skew how we do philosophy of religion. As Michelle Panchuk puts it, in too much philosophy of religion "the myth of the disembodied, dispassionate view from nowhere – which bears a striking resemblance to the view from cisgender, heterosexual, middle-class, white, able-bodied Christian males – reigns".[57]

Second, contemporary analytic philosophy of religion has recently begun to incorporate insights from philosophy of science. For example, Meghan Page's use of psychological modeling in discussing faith[58] or Helen de Cruz and Jonathan de Smet's use of cognitive science and evolutionary theories in ethics and aesthetics.[59] Yet we notice that philosophy of biology is less often incorporated into conversations about suffering and the nature of evil, including the biological and psychological data about death and dying. Given that much orthodox Christian theology thinks that death is among the greatest evil we can suffer, understanding the *nature* of death seems critical to advancing good arguments about the relationship between God and evil. Ted Sider, for instance, suggests that while metaphysics will not answer how we respond to death, being clear on what death is may have an impact on our moral evaluation (as, for example, coming to understand the underlying nature of a piece of fried chicken may make some vegetarians – Sider's own example).[60] We suggest that there is great value in bringing both psychological and biological discussions of disability and illness to bear on discussions about these phenomena in philosophy of religion.

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[55]See the social sin section of Kevin Timpe, "Sin in the Christian Thought", *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, April 15, 2021, https://plato.stanford.wdu/entries/sin-christian/; see also the discussion of social evils in Kevin Timpe, "Public Policy and the Administrative Evil of Special Education", in *The Palgrave Handbook of Philosophy and Public Policy*, ed. David Boonin (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 249–62.

[56]Eva Feder Kittay, "The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes from the Battlefield", in *Cognitive Disability and Its Challenge to Moral Philosophy*, ed. Eva Feder Kittay and Licia Carlson (New York: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 393–413.

[57]Michelle Panchuk, "That We May Be Whole: Doing Philosophy of Religion with the Whole Self", in *The Lost Sheep in Philosophy of Religion: New Perspectives on Disability, Gender, Race, and Animals*, ed. Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe (New York: Routledge, 2019), 56.

[58]Meghan Page, "The Posture of Faith", *Oxford Studies in Philosophy and Religion* 8 (2017): 227–44.

[59]Helen de Cruz and Jonathan de Smet, *A Natural History of Natural Theology: The Cognitive Science of Theology and Philosophy of Religion* (Cambridge, MA: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 2015).

[60]Theodore Sider, "The Evil of Death: What can Metaphysics Contribute", in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Death*, ed. Ben Bradley, Fred Feldman, and Jens Johansson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 1.

Consider, for example, the importance of biological and psychological data about the experience of chronic pain. Pain is usually taken to be a straightforward "bad" by theorists in the problem of evil. While the relationship between chronic pain and experience of psychological conditions such as anxiety and depression is well documented, there are growing investigations into the ways that optimism, hope, or expectations of the future can impact one's experience of chronic pain. This is not to say that optimism is merely a countervailing good offsetting some of one's pain; in some cases, studies suggest that optimism (defined as positive expectations of the future) is associated with improvement in at least one symptom of chronic, physical pain. Moreover, numerous studies suggest that the overall experience of pain itself can be changed by a variety of other circumstances: the existence of pain alongside other psychological factors is not inert; rather, these influence each other which results in a more complex picture, one deserving of attention in our treatment of such allegedly "physical" conditions in the problem of evil.

To consider the question in broader terms, we can look to controversies over a unified concept of "health" and "disease" – both concepts employed at least tacitly by those who defend a view of the problem of evil on which disabilities and diseases are necessarily bad. But what is it to be "healthy" or "diseased" turns out to be far from straightforward. Elselijn Kingma,[61] for example, argues against Christopher Boorse's well-known "Biostatistical Theory" (BST) of normal function in which health corresponds to a range of states or functions that fall within parameters set by a specified reference class (commonly age and sex). But as Kingma points out, the theory itself lacks justification for why *these* reference classes are the appropriate ones, nor is it able to account for the dynamic physiological responses that our bodies undergo (consider as she does hormonal shifts, cardiac output, blood pressure, or sweating).[62]

However, this is far from advocating for a "medical model" of disability or illness. In fact, we think that certain assumptions about the biological and/or psychological nature of these phenomena lie behind the concrete mistreatment of disabled individuals and theoretical misconstruals of disability itself. In arguing for more conversation between psychology, biology, and philosophy of religion in this realm, we want to suggest that disability studies has *as much to contribute* in the re-formation of these disciplines as it does philosophy of religion. Understanding the nature of functional performance versus functional mode, for example, or questioning the reference classes used to establish the biological (or even psychological) parameters of the "norm" will have a cascading effect on what we think God is "up to" in the creation and redemption of the world.

What does this mean for the problem of evil? More investigation is needed, but it points to a broad concern about the basis on which our definitions of vital concepts (e.g., health, disease, normal and abnormal function) for discussing disability are founded. If these concepts need revision in order to better account for biological realities, then we should be cautious before employing those concepts in the moral lens required in the problem of evil. This would bring a welcome change to how disability is currently engaged in philosophy of religion.[63]

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[61]Elselijn Kingma, "Paracetamol, Poison, and Polio: Why Boorse's Account of Function Fails to Distinguish Health and Disease", *British Journal for the Philosophy of Science* 61, no. 2 (2010): 241–64.
[62]Ibid., 250.
[63]We would like to thank Eleonore Stump, Amy Seymour, Aaron Cobb, Jason Eberl, David McNaughton, and Yoon Shin for helpful comments on earlier drafts of this chapter.

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