

Disability and the Resurrection of the Body: Identity and Imagination

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I love Star Wars. I watched Luke destroy the Death Star as a wide-eyed eight-year-old and I relished the downfall of the imperial walkers on the ice planet Hoth. I rejoiced with Luke at seeing his father, Anakin Skywalker (Darth Vader), restored in death to the Good Side of the Force, glowing faintly alongside Obi-wan Kenobi and the Jedi master Yoda. In the 1983 version of *The Return of the Jedi*, Anakin's Force ghost looked like the old, wounded, disabled man whose body Luke rescued from the second Death Star about to explode. Hayden Christiansen, who plays Anakin as a young man in the prequels *Attack of the Clones* and *The Revenge of the Sith*, was only two years old then; yet the 1983 film has since been edited so that his image is the Force ghost alongside Obi-wan Kenobi and Yoda. I find this troubling—and not just because I am a cantankerous old fan who likes things the way they were.

For a theologian with an interest in disability,¹ the swap calls to mind the worries of some disability theologians² about continuity and discontinuity

¹ By disability, I mean unusual limitations on ordinary activities involving mobility, the senses, and cognitive function that diminish an individual's ability to participate in community life, including political engagement, social-cultural participation, and education.

² Typically, the worriers are systematic or practical theologians, Protestant, without robust metaphysics. Thinking about disability and doctrines like the resurrection of the body or the *imago Dei* with an eye to metaphysics tends to emerge from Catholic moral theologians, especially those who study Thomas. There are notable exceptions,

in the resurrection: if disabilities that marked us or our loved ones in this life are eradicated, how does identity persist? George Lucas explained in an interview that, when Anakin Skywalker was “redeemed,” he went back to being the person he was before he was consumed by the Dark Side: the *real* Anakin ceased to be when he became Darth Vader.³ But the replacement of the post–Darth Vader Anakin with the young, pre–Darth Vader Anakin creates enormous problems for thinking about the resurrection, even in the fictional Star Wars universe.⁴ Anakin seems to lose most of his adult life. Would he remember that he had been Darth Vader, or that he saved Luke’s life? If he does not remember the event, how can this Force ghost be the same person that Luke rescued from Death Star 2.0? George Lucas’s decision to replace Sebastian Shaw, who played Darth Vader in the original *Return of the Jedi*, with Hayden Christiansen introduces radical discontinuity into the narrative. The substitution does not give us the “real” Anakin; instead, we are left with neither Anakin nor Darth Vader, but a different person; someone Luke would not have recognized, and who might well not recognize either Luke or himself.

In a similar vein, Nancy Eiesland mused that, without her disability, caused by a congenital, degenerative bone disease, she would be “unknown to [herself] and perhaps to God.”⁵ Her perception of resurrection healing was that she would be as different in the resurrection as Hayden Christiansen is to Sebastian Shaw. Drawing on classical Christian teaching from Gregory of Nyssa to Matthias Scheeben,⁶ I will show in this essay that Eiesland’s con-

however; for example, philosopher Richard Cross has contributed to the literature on disability and resurrection. The dividing line between the anxious and the traditional seems to fall between those with a Thomistic account of the metaphysics of the resurrection and those that take a modern phenomenological approach, which begins with the body and expects the body–mind of the individual (rather than the soul) to carry personal identity into the resurrection.

³ When Anakin Skywalker was “redeemed,” his “inner person would go back to where we left it off,” Lucas said ([screenrant.com/return-jedi-anakin-ghost-hayden-christensen-sebastian-shaw-replace/](https://www.screenrant.com/return-jedi-anakin-ghost-hayden-christensen-sebastian-shaw-replace/)).

⁴ It is equally troubling for ethics. See my “Jean Vanier: A Paradox for Cancel Culture” in *The Witness of L’Arche after Jean Vanier* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2024).

⁵ Nancy Eiesland, “Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities,” *impact* 14, no. 3 (2001–2002), publications.ici.umn.edu/impact/14-3/liberation-inclusion-and-justice-a-faith-response-to-persons-with-disabilities.

⁶ I take Scheeben as my example, despite his idiosyncrasies, because he draws from the breadth and depth of classical Christian doctrine and offers a broadly Thomistic theological anthropology. The objections I consider in this paper target an account of the human person that is often either attributed (rightly or wrongly) to St. Thomas or alludes to elements of his theological anthropology.

cern is misplaced. Considering the way that the resurrection body is often portrayed, however, her concern is understandable. Disability theologians' qualms about the resurrection deserve a retrieval of the classical doctrine that addresses their suspicions about the discontinuity of identity in the resurrection and upholds the full humanity of people with disabilities, even profound intellectual disabilities.

I

In one sense, the questions raised by disability theologians are not new.⁷ First-century Christians argued about the transformation that St. Paul envisaged, which involved continuity and change. In 1 Corinthians, he tells us “a mystery . . . we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed. For this perishable nature must put on the imperishable, and this mortal nature must put on immortality” (15:51–53). Christians debated the nature of the change involved in putting on immortality and in their debates asked questions about the continuity of identity. Early Christian thinkers, like the early-third-century theologian Tertullian (AD 160–220), were keen to establish that the ensouled body resurrected to punishment or reward was the same as the earthly embodied soul that merited one or the other. For Tertullian, the resurrected Anakin must be the same Anakin that merited reward or punishment, in order that his reward or punishment be just.

Modern theologians ask a slightly different question about the identity of the self: “Will I still be *me* in heaven?”—that is, is the Force ghost alongside Obi-Wan and Yoda *really* Anakin Skywalker? Would they recognize him? Would Luke recognize him? Would he recognize himself? Depictions of the resurrection of the body that highlight the body's perfection (even if that perfection only enables the person to experience the punishment he or she deserves) make it seem as though a kind of swap is taking place like that between Shaw and Christiansen. Stereotypical portrayals of “perfection” in the resurrection involve cultural ideals and assume the eradication of disability in heaven. Theological accounts of heaven drawn from the broad

⁷ See, for example, Candida Moss, *Divine Bodies: Resurrecting Perfection in the New Testament and Early Christianity* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019); Outi Lehtipuu, *Debates Over the Resurrection of the Dead: Constructing Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Caroline Walker Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity, 200–1336* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995).

and deep river of classical Christian doctrine, like that of nineteenth-century theologian Matthias Scheeben, do not describe the stereotypical resurrection body. Yet they do not rule out the possibility that our resurrected bodies will simply conform to ideals of beauty and perfection. Scheeben explains that the transfiguration of the body in the resurrection is a “glorification which completely transforms nature.” This transformation sublimates the body and its life, makes “impossible the revival of its natural shortcomings,” eliminates its natural defects, and makes the body perfectly submissive to the soul. Human nature in the resurrection, he writes, must become “an unsullied mirror for the reception of the light of glory.”⁸ The elimination of natural defects implies the cure of disabilities in heaven.⁹ To illustrate more fully the qualms of theologians who work on disability, I will give an overview of the concerns they raise and consider an example of the misapprehension out of which Eiesland’s doubt about being known by God or herself without her disability arises.

Brian Brock, a Christian ethicist and father of a young man with Down Syndrome and autism, worries about notions of resurrection in which people are raised from the dead without “the traits that are constitutive of the identities of people with all sorts of mental and physical disabilities, including autism.”¹⁰ If not in the physical and behavioral characteristics of their earthly existence, in what does the continuity of their identity consist? Just such a concern prompted the Pentecostal theologian Amos Yong to ask, “if people with Down Syndrome are resurrected without it, in what sense can we say that it is they who are resurrected and embraced by their loved ones?”¹¹ The idea that “the soul is the principle of each person’s continuity in change,” which Yong draws from Gregory of Nyssa, does not satisfy him. Nor would it satisfy Frances Young, a historian of early Christianity whose eldest child, Arthur, was born with profound disabilities. She explains the problem with conceiving of the resurrection as bringing forth of a self which was hidden beneath a disability.

⁸ Matthias Scheeben, *The Mysteries of Christianity*, trans. Cyril Vollert, S.J. (St. Louis, MO: B. Herder, 1947), 679.

⁹ See Amos Yong’s account of the classical view in *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 265–70.

¹⁰ Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), 181.

¹¹ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 270.

There is no “ideal Arthur” somehow trapped in this damaged physical casing. He is a psychosomatic whole. . . . What sense would it make to hope for “healing” in cases like this? Suppose that some faith healer laid hands on Arthur tomorrow and all his damaged brain cells were miraculously healed, what then? Brains gradually develop over the years through learning. . . . The development of our selves as persons is bound up with this learning process. . . . I find it impossible to envisage what it would mean for him to be “healed” because what personality there is is so much part of him *as he is*, with all his limitations. “Healed” he would be a different person.¹²

In dismissing the notion of an “ideal” Arthur, Frances Young captures the essence of my colleagues’ apprehension about the resurrection of the body. If Arthur’s body is perfected and glorified as Scheeben describes, how can it possibly be *his* body? Whether the healing is like the restoration of Anakin Skywalker, which erases his disfigurement, or like the miracle healing Frances Young describes, the problem is the same. For those who consider disability in some way constitutive of identity, “perfection” is more a threat than a promise: healing that eradicates a disabling condition does not just alleviate the associated suffering; it deprives people of a core aspect of their identity.

Amos Yong’s interpretation of an anecdote narrated by Robert Orsi, historian of American Catholicism, offers an example of the perception of disability as a core aspect of personal identity.

Orsi tells of his uncle Sal, who had cerebral palsy, and of Sal’s relationship with the patron saint of people with disabilities, Margaret of Castello. Margaret was a limped, hunched, blind, and dwarfed woman who accomplished more than 200 miracles.¹³ Sal anticipates recognizing Margaret in heaven and saying, “I like it that there’s somebody up there . . . like us.” This suggests not only that Margaret will retain the features of her disability even in her resurrected body, but also that Sal anticipates that the vestiges of his disability will not completely disappear even in the eschaton; . . . the sense is that all will be OK in heaven not because bodily or cognitive parts have been

¹² Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (London: T & T Clark, 1990), 61–62. Note that Young’s concern is about the “person” and “personality” of her son, Arthur. These, I suggest, need to be distinguished carefully, technically, with reference to theological anthropology.

¹³ Now St. Margaret of Castello; she had not then been canonized.

“fixed,” but because the people of God will be fully in the presence of and love of God.¹⁴

Yong takes “I like it that there’s somebody up there like us” (with a heavenward glance) as evidence that Sal believed that both he and Margaret would retain their disabilities in heaven.¹⁵ Yong assumed that Sal looked forward to recognizing St. Margaret *by the traits that marked her in life*, and so also that Sal’s comment sprang from a belief that people marked by disability in this life will retain at least “the vestiges of [their disabilities]. . . even in the eschaton.” This reading of Sal’s comment leads Yong to assume, further, that Sal’s devotion to St. Margaret is connected to *the way in which their disabilities identify them both*.

I do not think Sal’s comment means what Amos Yong thinks it means. The literary and historical context of Orsi’s anecdote hints at a different frame for theological reflection on the resurrection of the disabled body. Orsi reports the exchange with his uncle in an essay in which he criticizes “the narrative of the holy cripple” in the culture of suffering in mid-twentieth-century Catholic America.¹⁶ He offers Sal’s spiritual life as the background and context for his uncle’s comment about St. Margaret. Orsi explains:

[Sal] has always been a devout man. . . . He says the rosary daily, surrounds himself with images of the saints, and plans to be buried in the robes of the Third Order of St Francis. Sal made a home (and a future grave) for himself in these idioms; through them, he could find comfort, consolation, and meaning for himself. In the prayer books tightly wrapped with rubber bands and jammed into a duffel bag fixed to the back of his chair, Sal had access to an intimate language for discovering, making, and naming his desires, fears and hopes, and a language in which to address them to powerful figures who, he was told, would be listening closely to him. Devotionalism also gave Sal a set of practices—making the sign of the cross, fingering his beads,

¹⁴ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 268.

¹⁵ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 268.

¹⁶ Orsi’s reading is entirely sociological. His conclusion, that “Margaret subverts the narrative of the holy cripple” may be an adequate social or cultural reading, does not engage theological accounts of holiness. For Orsi, holiness is marked by isolation from the world and its pleasures. Margaret of Costello’s place in heaven, he suggests, gives Sal a sense of his dignity on earth. See Robert Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth: The Religious Worlds People Make and the Scholars Who Study Them* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004), 46.

touching holy water, and so on—through which he could embody the prayers he was saying. It was in this world that he found Margaret of Castello.¹⁷

In response to Sal's comment that he was glad to have someone like him "up there," Orsi asked: "Don't you think . . . that St Francis and St Anthony can know what you feel, since they're saints?" Sal's response was an angry rant, in which he reminded Orsi, "You can get up and walk out of here today, but I can't." Neither Orsi, nor St. Francis or St. Anthony, would ever know "what it was like to be crippled."¹⁸ Sal wanted Margaret's intercession in the present because he believed that she understood his experience; he was not looking forward to an eschatological meeting that would show that he was OK without being "fixed." Orsi's description of his uncle's devotion and the exchange he reports both suggest that Sal's spiritual life followed the outlines of mid-twentieth-century Catholic devotion. He prayed, he attended Mass, and he believed in the communion of the saints and the resurrection of his body, which he would have expected to move freely in heaven as it did not on earth.

II

The example of Sal and his devotion to Margaret of Castello suggests a continuity of identity *through* the healing of disability. Despite our inability to imagine what we or our loved ones would be like without the disabilities, God does not depend on the appearance or function of our bodies (or our minds) to identify us. Yet that does not mean that disabilities are invisible or unimportant to God who "heals all our diseases" (Ps 102:LXX). Eiesland's statement (as Amos Yong has put it) "[calls] attention to how living with disabilities shapes our lives, relationships, and identities in substantive rather than incidental ways"¹⁹ and points to a number of overlapping and intersecting concerns raised by the full healing of cognitive and bodily impairments. The concerns fall into two broad sets, and I will describe them in turn.

In the first place, how we imagine the resurrection matters. Yong and others push back against the modern preoccupation with a narrowly conceived notion of health and wholeness that assumes the abnormality and undesirability of disabled bodies and minds, which is reflected in

¹⁷ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 42–43.

¹⁸ Orsi, *Between Heaven and Earth*, 39–42.

¹⁹ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 269.

stereotypical portrayals of the resurrection.²⁰ Resurrection healing may be taken, rightly or wrongly, as the ideal for a “normal” human life. And “normality” has supported the exclusion of people with disabilities from various aspects of life—educational, social, cultural, and religious.²¹

Second, making sense of disability also involves facing questions of theodicy: if disabilities are healed in heaven, why does God allow disability on earth? Is disability punishment for sin, as implied by the disciples’ question in John 9 (“Who sinned, this man or his father?”) and Job’s friends’ explanations of his misfortunes? Eiesland, Yong, and others—including Pope St. John Paul II in his 1984 *Salvifici Doloris*—rightly insist that disability is not punishment for sin.²² Yet both Yong and Eiesland relate the disappointment and shame that followed from prayers for healing that did not result in a cure.²³

Against these concerns, I wish to point out that, if disability were eradicated so completely that Eiesland would not recognize herself, then there would be no reason for Sal to believe that there was anyone “up there” like him. In that case, likeness would disappear along with the disability. But Sal’s reference to “someone up there like us” suggests, paradoxically, that St. Margaret’s resurrection body would be the perfected body of a disabled woman. Her body would have all the characteristics associated with the resurrection and yet it would not be the body of a different person. Yong is not wrong to think that *something* of a person’s disability remains in heaven: the question is how we ought to imagine disability in the resurrection.

Exploring this question in a way that addresses the concerns of my colleagues in disability theology takes us to the core of traditional theological

²⁰ See John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (London: SCM, 2017); Swinton, *Becoming Friends of Time: Disability, Timefulness, and Gentle Discipleship* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2016); Swinton, *Finding Jesus in the Storm: The Spiritual Lives of Christians with Mental Health Challenges* (London: SCM, 2020); Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, esp. 141–69. See also Moss, *Divine Bodies*.

²¹ See Paul Gondreau, “Disability, the Healing of Infirmary, and the Theological Virtue of Hope: A Thomistic Approach,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 104–10.

²² Nearly everyone I discuss in this paper has argued, implied, or assumed this in one way or another in their writing. The conversation around theodicy has shifted in the past two decades, and disability is no longer blamed on a person’s sin (whether his or his parents’) in respectable theological circles. Yet the question of why God does not heal disabilities or illnesses persists. See, for example, Shane Clifton “The Dark Side of Prayer for Healing: Toward a Theology of Well-being,” *Pneuma* 36 (2014): 204–25, and Andrew Wilson, “God Always Heals,” *The Christian Century*, November 2014, 34.

²³ Eiesland reports the whispers about her “hidden sins” that followed various attempts to heal her. When Yong’s brother, Mark, was not healed, suspicion fell hard on Yong’s parents because his father was a pastor.

anthropology: that the soul is the person's continuity of identity in change. We can be sure that the person in heaven *will* be shaped in some way by earthly disability because the soul remembers the body it informed in earthly life, and *that* is the body to which it will be reunited in heaven. The earthly impairments of the body will not impair the body in heaven because soul and body will be perfectly united in the *telos* of human life, which is to enjoy the beatific vision—not run like Usain Bolt or think like Albert Einstein. Those who see traditional theological anthropology as a threat to personhood need to be convinced of four things. First, even those with profound intellectual disabilities have a rational soul. Second, the “soul” is not the “self.” Third, the soul and body form a unity. And finally, the person raised is (numerically) identical with the earthly person, transformed.

But there is a caveat: understanding that the soul is the principle of continuity in change does not answer all our questions. Christian doctrine points to a mystery, “a truth communicated to us by Christian revelation, a truth to which we cannot attain by our unaided reason, and which, even after we have attained to it by faith, we cannot adequately represent with our rational concepts.”²⁴ We cannot produce a guide to the mechanics of the union of soul and body. So also, we cannot explain why the rational soul, which is the form of the body, does not perfect every body in life.

III

I begin with the rational soul because it has often been wrongly conflated with the mind. This mistaken impression about the rational soul raises questions about whether people with profound intellectual disabilities *have* a rational soul. In order to show that the soul is *every* person's principle of continuity in change, I distinguish Christian teaching from misconceptions of it.²⁵

Differing ideas about the rational soul lead to divergent accounts of the human person. On one hand, there are those who, like Amos Yong, argue for the full humanity of those with profound intellectual disabilities by describing the image of God as an emergent property rather than the

²⁴ Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 13. For a fuller account of mystery, see 5–13.

²⁵ The question about the full humanity of people with disabilities is a particularly thorny question in the case of cognitive impairment, and responses to the question bring to light a fault line in disability theology that divides differing accounts of the soul and the image of God. See Miguel Romero's correction of Hans Reinders' account of Thomistic anthropology in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 105.

essential feature of human beings.²⁶ This move abandons classical Christian theological anthropology, which is accused of making the exercise of rational thought the measure of full humanity. In developing his emergentist anthropology, Yong consciously shelves hylemorphic anthropology, implying that it is an outdated and barren concept.²⁷

Reading Gregory of Nyssa in conversation with an “emergentist view of the person” drawn from neuroscientific studies, Yong constructs a theological anthropology that posits “the soul as an emergent set of distinctive features and capabilities constituted by but irreducible to the sum of the body’s biological parts.”²⁸ This allows Yong to interpret the *imago Dei* not as what we *are*, but what we are all in the process of *becoming*.²⁹ On his reading, our resurrected bodies will look like our earthly bodies, with the marks of disability (e.g. the phenotypical features associated with Down Syndrome) intact. A person with disabilities does not need to be healed, therefore, in order to enjoy heavenly life. Yong suggests, however, that a gradual healing

²⁶ See especially Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 350–78. Molly Haslam displays an egregious misunderstanding of the classical Christian account of the *imago Dei* in her well-meaning but theologically uninformed and irresponsible book, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012); she defines the *imago Dei* so as to include the profoundly intellectually disabled in a way that also extends it to non-human animals. Yong’s own view is that the image of God is something that we find not in human beings themselves, but in their relationship with God, with others, and with the rest of creation. It is certainly true that the image of God exists in human beings in virtue of their relationship with God—but that relationship ought to be understood as one of causality in the first instance. God causes creation and human beings reflect their cause in a unique way among creatures. Creation in God’s image means, however, that even if all the human and non-human animals on earth save one person were swept off the planet, that person would still bear the image of God. See Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 180.

²⁷ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 170.

²⁸ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 171. Terence Ehrman identifies the problems with Yong’s theological anthropology in “Disability and Resurrection Identity,” *New Blackfriars* 96 (2015): 723–38, at 724–27.

²⁹ Yong parts ways with classical theological anthropology; instead of retrieving St. Thomas, he chooses to “explore the possibility of rethinking what it means to be human in dialogue with more recent views that suggest [the emergent soul].” Without reading St. Thomas, he assumes that Thomas relegates “the body to secondary status” and on that basis pushes aside the whole tradition of classical theological anthropology. For a fuller description of and engagement with Yong’s account, see Peter Comensoli, *In God’s Image: Recognizing the Profoundly Disabled as Persons* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2018), 159–71.

will take place in heaven: the resurrection will be the *beginning* of our transformation.³⁰ This implies that the rational soul also emerges; in Yong's theological anthropology, there is no way to account for a capacity that cannot be expressed.

Yet there are those (myself included) who argue that whether or not an individual can exercise the capacity for rational thought, she has a rational soul.³¹ As Thomas explains:

Meritorious knowledge and love of God is only possible through grace. There is, however, such a thing as natural knowledge and love of God. . . . And it is also natural to the mind that it has the power of using reason to understand God, and it was in terms of such a power that we said God's image remains always in the mind; *whether this image is of God is so faint*—so shadowy, we might say—that it is *practically non-existent*, as in those who lack the use of reason; *or whether it is dim and disfigured*, as in sinners; *or whether it is bright and beautiful*, as in the just, as Augustine says.³²

We should note three implications of this account. First, the rational soul is an inherent, inalienable *capacity* of human beings, whether or not it is in *evidence*. Second, reason's *telos* is the knowledge of God.³³ The soul makes us *capax Dei* as well as *imago Dei*; it is not just a feature of human being, but marks the human creature as having a unique relationship with the creator. Moreover, the rational soul makes us not only rational, but creative and loving as well; our rationality is perfected in knowledge and love of God. As the very essence of our being, the rational soul fits human beings for our

³⁰ This relies on a misinterpretation of Gregory of Nyssa, but I do not have space to unpack it in this paper.

³¹ See, e.g., Miguel Romero, "The Happiness of Those Who Lack the Use of Reason," *Thomist* 80, no. 1 (2016): 49–96; John Berkman, "Are the Profoundly Intellectually Disabled Icons of the Heavenly Life?," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 26, no. 1 (2013): 83–96; Comensoli, *In God's Image*; Pia Matthews, *Discerning Persons: Profound Disability, the Early Church Fathers, and the Concept of the Person in Bioethics* (Steubenville, OH: Franciscan University Press, 2020).

³² Thomas Aquinas, *Summa theologiae* [ST] I, q. 93, a. 9, *ad* 3 (trans. Edmund Hill in *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 13, *Man Made to God's Image: 1a. 90–102* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006]).

³³ In this, Aquinas follows Augustine's description of the functioning of the image of God in *De Trinitate* 15.12–18; see also John Edward Sullivan, O.P., *The Image of God: The Doctrine of St. Augustine and Its Influence* (Dubuque, IA: Priory Press, 1963), 115–49 and 216–40.

peculiar participation in God and our reflection of God's image. As the principle of identity, the soul is the driver of the resurrection body. Yet, as the locus of our capacity for knowing and loving God, the soul is not the *site* of disability. Impairment of the mind or body does not disable the soul.³⁴

Because disability does not impair relationship with God, people with disabilities, even profound cognitive impairments, are no less in the image of God than a professor of moral theology. A cognitive impairment may constitute a disability in the world, but it does not disable a person in his or her relationship with God. We do not reason our way to God. Rather, God reveals himself to us, and our inability to exercise the capacity for rational thought does not hinder God. It is not the clever who Jesus says will see God, but the pure in heart. In what follows, I will dig deeper into Gregory of Nyssa's account of the soul in order to show its promise for our theological anthropology.

IV

In the previous section I set out Amos Yong's definition of the soul, which he developed in conversation with Gregory of Nyssa and then-recent theological engagements with neuroscience. Yong's reading of Gregory's theological anthropology merits closer attention, however. Yong targets the question of "how the material and immaterial realms relate to each other," and in so doing misses one aspect of what Gregory has to teach us about the paradoxical nature of Christian teaching on the soul. Gregory's teaching on the soul is typical of his exposition of the mysteries of Christian faith: he sets out what we must say about the soul; and explains the reasons why we must say what we say. Nevertheless, he tells us that we cannot fully explain what the soul is.

Although Gregory can explain the reasons for Christian teaching about the soul, the mechanics of the mysterious union of soul and body, like the mysteries of the Trinity and the Incarnation, remain beyond the grasp of human comprehension. In *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, Gregory gives what seems like a technical definition of the soul and then riffs on its elusiveness in *On the Making of Man*. He defines the soul as "an essence which has a beginning; it is a living and intellectual essence which by itself

³⁴ The body and mind may be impaired by limitations to movement, sense, or cognition; the soul is not impaired by any of these—disability itself does not impair the soul. Sin does that. See Kathryn Greene-McCreight, *Darkness Is My Only Companion: A Christian Response to Mental Illness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2015), 93–112; Medi Volpe, "Living the Mystery: Doctrine, Intellectual Disability, and Christian Imagination," *Journal of Moral Theology* 6, no. 2 (2017): 87–102.

gives to the organic and sensory body the power of life and reception of sense-impressions as long as the nature which can receive these maintains its existence.”³⁵ Yet that does not mean we know “how it comes into being, how it is composed, whence it enters into the body, how it departs from it, or what means it possesses to unite it to the nature of the body.”³⁶

Scripture and its interpretation (including the Creed as an interpretation of sorts) have guided belief and given shape to Christian teaching since well before Gregory’s time and continue to do so. That includes teaching on the soul.³⁷ But not everything admits of explanations of the kind modern people have come to expect! I say this now so that when I do tell you that hylemorphic anthropology and the concept of numerical identity help us to understand *that* the soul is the principle of continuity in change, you will not think that either of these concepts tells us *how* the material and immaterial are related! The soul is present to God in this life and the next.³⁸ *God*, who is closer to me than my own soul—as Julian of Norwich observes—ultimately ensures the continuity of identity both in earthly life and in the resurrection. To say that, however, is not to explain how soul and body are connected, but to sketch the shape of the mystery.

V

That having been said, I intend now to explore the particular mystery of the way that the disability of the body on earth marks the unique *esse* of the individual soul. We don’t know *how* the soul is shaped by disability: that pertains to the mystery of the union of the soul and the body. In this section I consider one proposal that begins to do the necessary work of explaining in a technical way *why* we ought to believe that the soul is the form of the body and yet maintain that the soul may retain some impression of disability.

Terence Ehrman uses hylemorphic anthropology to argue that, even if people with disabilities are fully healed in the resurrection, their identity is not compromised.³⁹ I draw on his essay on disability and resurrection here because his account of hylemorphic anthropology is clear and targeted toward objections to Thomistic theological anthropology. He explains that

³⁵ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, trans. Catharine P. Roth (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1993), 37–38.

³⁶ Gregory of Nyssa, *Contra Eunomius* 2.115 (*Gregorii Nysseni Opera*, vol. 1, ed. Wernerus Jaeger [Leiden: Brill, 1960], 258; *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series, 5:261).

³⁷ See, e.g., *Catechism of the Catholic Church* §§362–67, on the unity of body and soul.

³⁸ Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Soul and the Resurrection*, 18–20, 45–48.

³⁹ Ehrman, “Disability.”

any given entity is composed of form and matter. Form actualizes matter and gives the entity its unique characteristics. To understand the unity of form and matter, Ehrman uses the analogy of a word and its meaning. A word cannot be separated from its meaning and still be a word. In the human being, he explains, “the soul is *in* the body the way meaning is in a word; as the form of the body, the soul is its organizing principle.”⁴⁰

On the basis of this account of body and soul, Ehrman shows why impairments or disabilities are not intrinsic to the human being: the soul forms the body according to human nature.⁴¹ Resurrection identity means being the same body–soul unity one was in earthly life. Continuity of identity is insured because hylemorphism entails numerical identity. Numerical identity means that we are not just the same kind of entity we were before, but the very same entity. As he explains, “the continuity of identity resides primarily in the *esse* of the soul,”⁴² and that “soul is configured to only one body.”⁴³ My soul cannot inform any body but my own in the resurrection, therefore if I am resurrected, I can be resurrected only as myself. *My* soul has to be united with *my* body. That is the force of *numerical* identity.⁴⁴ Arthur in heaven will still be Arthur, even if he has gained all the capacities his earthly body lacked, because his soul—the *esse* of his soul—will “remember.” So the resurrected body of St. Margaret of Castello, without her limp, her hunched back, or her blindness, remains “like” Orsi’s uncle Sal in heaven. At that point, that which prevented the soul from forming the body perfectly for its *telos*—joy in God for eternity—is gone. Something of St. Margaret’s disability must remain, because she is St. Margaret, but whatever remains is not disabling in heaven because there is nothing in heaven to stop the embodied soul from full participation in divine life.⁴⁵

Ehrman offers another analogy to guide our thinking about continuity and discontinuity in the resurrection. An academic on sabbatical in a foreign country may be limited by challenges working in a language other than her own. Back in her home country, a colleague who had encountered her only during that sabbatical year might “[marvel] at [her] performance and [tell

⁴⁰ Ehrman, “Disability,” 279.

⁴¹ Ehrman explains that impairments are not a part of the way the soul forms the body; instead, they are frustrated capacities (“Disability,” 730).

⁴² “Disability and Resurrection,” 734.

⁴³ Ehrman, “Disability,” 735.

⁴⁴ See Antonia Fitzpatrick, *Thomas Aquinas on Bodily Identity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 141–51.

⁴⁵ Disability or impairment has no meaning apart from a typical human life, which is why the perception of disability is tied to the requirements of earthly life. See, e.g., Berkman, “Are the Profoundly Intellectually Disabled Icons of the Heavenly Life?”

her] that she enjoyed finally seeing [her] . . . in [her] native environment. . . . In the resurrection, we shall finally be in our element and in action, transformed in God's love and grace. . . . We shall become truly ourselves in our true homeland freed from all limitations of the fallen world."⁴⁶

Provided that we understand the analogy to apply to all of us (which I think it does), it helps us to think about the continuity and discontinuity problem in the resurrection. It also points us back to an important consideration—that we are destined to enjoy the beatific vision “in our true homeland.” The point at which the analogy breaks down is telling: that which we struggle to do in the “foreign country” is to allow the Holy Spirit to be the cause of all our actions. That limitation is far more serious than the limitations we perceive when we look at those labelled disabled. We are all spiritually “disabled” by sin and require a complete cure.

Ehrman concludes by reflecting that perhaps some marks *ought* to persist in the resurrection body. “Augustine speculates,” Ehrman explains, “about radical healing in the resurrection such that the wounds of the martyrs will not be deformities but have a dignity luminous in beauty. Any lost members will be restored and marks of the martyrdom will not be considered defects at all.”⁴⁷

I suggest that this final reflection points to a way of thinking about the soul and body that I have not seen elsewhere. Disability theology often reflects on the wounds of Christ as well, but we ought to begin with the Incarnation. The Incarnation points to a different way to imagine the way earthly disabilities affect the soul and persist in heaven: by analogy with the way we believe that Christ suffered impassibly. It is a paradox: the incarnate Word of God suffered in his flesh. The disabled body of St. Margaret remains the disabled body of St. Margaret: it is the perfected and glorified disabled body of St. Margaret. Thinking in this way might address some of the worries of my colleagues in disability theology, yet there are two issues still to be considered.

VI

In this, the penultimate section of the paper, I address two outstanding concerns. First, there is a concern that the beauty of the perfected body in heaven corresponds to cultural ideals.⁴⁸ Some literary and artistic represen-

⁴⁶ Ehrman, “Disability,” 738.

⁴⁷ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 22.19, quoted in Ehrman, “Disability,” 737.

⁴⁸ See, for example, Moss, *Divine Bodies*.

tations of the resurrection body do indeed seem to depict cultural ideals.⁴⁹ A theological account of the resurrection body, however, begins from the idea that beauty and perfection are properly characteristics of *God*, in which humans merely participate. The body therefore has no beauty or perfection of its own, but reflects the beauty and perfection of the soul, which participates in God's perfection and beauty. We can say *that* the soul's beauty informs the body, but we cannot say *how* the soul's beauty is reflected in the body. I am willing, however, to suggest that measuring the body against our cultural ideals of beauty and perfection would be a bad mistake. Whatever the body of the perfected soul looks like, there is no diet or workout that will enable us to achieve it. The training of the body may be good for the soul (ascetic practice rests on this assumption), and the making-perfect of the soul must likewise be good for the body, though we are ordinarily unable to recognize it.

Second, the most apparently threatening feature of traditional accounts of the resurrection is the dominion of the soul over the body. This dominion is achieved in the resurrection, as Scheeben explains, when the soul yields fully to the only power that can accomplish it: "the power of God's Spirit."⁵⁰ It appears as the worst sort of dualism, pitting the immaterial soul against the material body. But this is where the Platonic analogy of the musician and the instrument, to which Gregory of Nyssa appeals in *On the Making of Man*, breaks down for two reasons. First, the musician and the instrument can be separated and each retain its integrity, whereas the human person's integrity is the union of body and soul. Second, the kind of separation involved in the musician-instrument analogy allows us to see body and soul in a competitive way. Imagining the soul and body as potentially in competition is a mistake,

⁴⁹ See Gondreau, "Disability," 70.

⁵⁰ See Scheeben, *Mysteries*, 677. See also Aquinas, *Compendium theologiae* I, ch. 158:

In like manner, it is fitting that all natural defects should be corrected in the risen body. Any defect of this sort is prejudicial to the integrity of nature. And so, if human nature is to be completely renewed by God at the resurrection, such defects must be rectified.

Besides, these defects arose from a deficiency in the natural power which is the principle of human generation. But in the resurrection there will be no active causality other than the divine, which does not admit of deficiency. Therefore such defects as are found in men naturally begotten, will have no place in men restored by the resurrection (aquinas.cc/la/en/~CT.BookI.C158; the bolded "rectified" is rendered "taken away" in the Aquinas Institute translation).

however. The soul and body are no more in competition than the heart is in competition with the brain.⁵¹

How, then, are we to think about the soul, the body, and the union between them? As we have seen, we must think of the soul as not separate from the body, and of the union of body and soul as that which a human being *is*. The body is a body because of the soul that makes it a body—and not just *a* body, but the specific body it is. I suspect the hesitation about hylemorphic anthropology is partly owing to Aristotle's reputation among feminists (see, e.g. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*) and partly owing to a lack of engagement with the concept. Amos Yong sets it aside without exploring it in any detail, as I have observed (and see below for further discussion), in favor of a combination of theological and neuroscientific concepts that he believes stand a better chance of explaining the unity of the soul and body.⁵² His account, however, might have been better served by a more careful engagement with Thomistic anthropology. An emergentist anthropology cannot fully account for the continuity of identity over time, an identity that persists through the changes in its constitutive "biological parts." In hylemorphic anthropology, the soul is the principle of continuity.

Pre-modern and emergentist anthropologies part ways at the heart of the mystery of human nature. Yong developed his emergentist anthropology in an effort to set out "what constitutes the image of God and what defines human nature." Against the concept of the human being as a soul-body composite, Yong set the problems of "how the material and immaterial realms relate to each other and the more recent neuroscientific evidence that correlates mental life with cognitive brain states."⁵³ Gregory of Nyssa would likely remind Amos Yong that our account of the soul does not allow us to specify "how it comes into being, how it is composed, whence it enters into the body, how it departs from it, or what means it possesses to unite it to the nature of the body."⁵⁴ The correlation of brain states with mental activity, on

⁵¹ Scheeben draws on St. Thomas's account of the resurrection, though he does not elaborate on the theological anthropology that shapes it. Scheeben does not count the union of soul and body, an aspect of theological anthropology, as a mystery of Christianity in its own right (*Mysteries*, 667–95).

⁵² Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 170–71.

⁵³ Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 170.

⁵⁴ In constructing his emergentist anthropology, Yong uses Gregory in "definition" mode and overlooks (it seems) Gregory in "mystery" mode. Earlier I referred to Gregory of Nyssa on the soul and its union with the body as an example of the often paradoxical nature of theology. With regard to the soul, we believe *x*, and we can show from Scripture and Tradition our reasons for the account we give of *x*. But we cannot fully explain it; elements of *x* remain beyond the grasp of human comprehension.

the other hand, is not a problem. Yong seems to assume that proponents of a composite soul–body account of the human person would associate mental activity with the soul rather than the body. No: consciousness is not the soul. Even if what we consider to be the soul’s activity is mirrored in brain activity, the association of such activity with brain states is just what we ought to expect from a soul that animates the body.

VII: Conclusion

I have shown that we have good reasons for expecting that our earthly experience of disability will not simply disappear in the resurrection. In our thinking about the resurrection, we need to bear in mind the magnitude of the transformation involved, as I suggested earlier. The difference between those of us with even the most severe disabilities and those without disabilities is negligible compared to the difference between the way we are now and the way we will be in the resurrection. Being cured of sin and made pliable to the guidance of the Holy Spirit is a more radical change than the lame walking and the blind seeing.

And we go wrong if we seek the principle of continuity of identity/personhood in the *person* (with heavy emphasis on the body): the principle of human unity and continuity is the soul as it is present to *God*. Eternal life is that state in which our relationship with God is our *primary* identity, and we see ourselves (and presumably will see and be seen by others) in the light in which God has always seen us. In heaven we will be *different*, to be sure, but that is not to say that in heaven I will be “a different person,” as Frances Young worried Arthur would be. In heaven, we will be our true selves—beings created and held by God through all the “chances and changes of this life.” This may be surprising for us and for those who have known us. But the revelation of who I am will not shock God, in whom I have lived and moved and had my being from the moment of conception until my eternal rest, and it will really be me.

Because the resurrection of the body in Christian theology is *not* like coming back as a Force ghost, which is a resurrection concept that relies on the fecund and capacious imagination of George Lucas. As creative as he was, Lucas was not able to imagine a true self that incorporated, somehow, all that Anakin Skywalker had been—disabled and powerful, devoted and cruel—and all that he had done. Lucas could imagine bringing back the “real” Anakin only by reducing him to the person he was before he was seduced by the Dark Side. In the Manichaean universe of the Star Wars saga, there is no redemption, no hope of redemption. But what if Lucas could

imagine a Force that was only good, and moved all things only toward the good, a Force that could not be thwarted, and a Dark Side that would only ever be a shadow, a privation of the Force and not an opposing power? Then he might have been able to imagine a reality in which Anakin Skywalker was always sustained by the Force, which would account for his ability to save Luke after years of cruelty.

We do not believe in Force ghosts; we believe in the resurrection of the body by God's grace, which does not have to annihilate parts of our identity to bring us to our true selves. In John's gospel, we learn that "he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God" (3:21). The next person to come to Jesus—the light—is the Samaritan woman, who finds Jesus by the well. In the exchange that follows, Jesus reveals his identity to her—a woman of irregular marital status. She ventures, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ); when he comes he will show us all things." And Jesus replies, "I who speak to you am he." The woman leaves her water jar and goes into the city. "Come and see a man who told me all I ever did," she says to the people. "Can this be the Christ?" A disreputable woman becomes a witness to Christ: her deeds are brought into the light and, inexplicably, found to have been wrought "in God." To answer my disability theologian colleagues—in this sense only, only in the light of redemption, when the delightful ordering of creation (Wisdom 8:1) is revealed, will the impairments and failings that characterize our earthly lives find their true place in our identity. In the resurrection, we will find ourselves as if for the first time, and yet also—somehow, mysteriously—know ourselves as we have always been. N·V