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The Challenge of Autism for Relational Approaches to Theological Anthropology

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Abstract: In this paper I argue that autism places an important restraint upon the use of relationality in theological anthropology. This argument proceeds by outlining how the appropriation of dialectic personalism, which initiated 'the relational turn' in twentieth century theological anthropology, has struggled to escape the capacity or property-based focus on individual subjects. As such, this relational account remains discriminatory against those who do not or cannot enact a particular kind of relationality, as some models of autism suggest. Moreover, attention to interpersonal relationships as a key human capacity within twentieth century theological anthropology closely parallels and may even have informed the development of autism within psychology as, in part, a social impairment. The devastating collision of these two intellectual trajectories is made apparent in explicit references by contemporary theologians to autism as a condition that prevents some humans from bearing the image of God, developing fully into persons, or receiving God's grace by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Introduction

Thus the *tertium comparationis*, the analogy between God and man, is simply the existence of the I and the Thou in confrontation.

- Karl Barth¹

The attempt to be without God and others (sinful autonomy) leads to autism, that shrivelling of the self to the point of total self-absorption.

Spiritual autism thus characterises a kind of solitary self-confinement that

¹ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 4 vols. In 13pts., ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956-75) (hereafter *CD*), III/1, p.185.

stems from the inability, or the unwillingness, to communicate with others.

- Kevin J. Vanhoozer²

This loss [of infused virtue] can be characterized metaphorically as the onset of ‘spiritual autism’, insofar as the cognition of God and certain habituations may persist but the person ceases to be moved by God as by a second person.

- Andrew Pinsent³

The primary goal of this paper is to highlight the discriminatory way autism has come to be used in contemporary systematic theology. Examples of such statements from leading contemporary theologians can be seen in the final two quotations in the epigraph, and there are more detailed below. This raises several perplexing questions: Why are theologians using the particular diagnosis of autism within theological anthropology? What conceptual work is the idea of autism doing in contemporary theology? Where does the impulse to use autism in such an exclusionary fashion come from? This paper answers these questions by arguing that the concept of autism has developed in tandem to the relational turn within twentieth century theological anthropology. This has occurred in such a way that the particular form of relationality that Christian theologians wish to articulate as central to personhood, the image of God, and the life of faith has become yet another capacity defined only by those who do not seem able to perform it in a typical manner. The result of this trajectory, at the start of the twenty-first century, is the explicit and implicit exclusion of autistic persons from normative theological articulations of what it means to be human.

The doctrine of humanity has undergone radical upheavals over the last century. Advances in evolutionary biology and animal psychology tend to challenge traditional depictions of human uniqueness based on substances or capacities and instead stress the non-static, malleability of human physiology. The call for greater sensitivity towards the varieties of

² Kevin Vanhoozer, ‘Human being, individual and social’, in Colin E Gunton, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Christian Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p.177.

³ Andrew Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective in Aquinas’s Ethics: Virtues and Gifts* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p.100.

human embodiment, argued for by feminist, disability, and black theologians, has also unsettled essentialist categories and normative images of the ideal human. These challenges have accumulated to place an unsustainable burden upon modern interpretations of Boethius' definition (and perhaps invention) of the term 'person' as 'an individual substance of a rational nature'.⁴ In addition, throughout the twentieth century political concerns over, on the one hand, philosophies and political theories that absorb and lose the individual within the absolute or the collective, and on the other hand, Western individualism and consumerism, have brought the concept of a superior, isolated, self-conscious subject into disrepute in many theological circles. The 'turn to relationality' throughout the last century refers to the headlining of a particular qualitative form of relationality as the locus of human dignity and moral status.⁵ This moral status is often referred to by employing theological concepts, such as personhood, *imago Dei*, and sanctification, although none of these distinct ideas and terms were originally designed for this purpose.⁶ By prioritizing 'I-Thou' relationships, theologians have simultaneously been able to weather these conceptual storms in anthropology, revitalize the doctrine of the Trinity, and provide a normative answer to the apparent ethical and political ailments of their time. This is no mean feat, and I am mindful of these achievements even as I call into question the manner in which this enterprise has led to the theological exclusion of one specific group of human beings; autistic persons.⁷

⁴ Boethius, *Liber de Personae et Duabus Naturis*, ch.3; *Patrologia Latina* 64:1343C. A say 'modern interpretations' of Boethius' famous maximum to acknowledge the disjunction between Boethius' concern for clarity in Christological debates and the modern predilection to use personhood to establish moral standing. See, Scott Williams, 'When Personhood Goes Wrong in Ethics and Philosophical Theology: Disability, Ableism, and (Modern) Personhood', in Blake Hereth and Kevin Timpe, eds., *The Lost Sheep in the Philosophy of Religion* (New York: Routledge, 2019), pp.264-290.

⁵ The phrase 'turn to relationality' is taken from F. LeRon Shults's study, *Reforming Theological Anthropology: After the Philosophical Turn to Relationality*, (Grand Rapids: MI: Eerdmans, 2003).

⁶ I do not think personhood, the *imago Dei*, or sanctification by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are identical or even mostly overlapping terms. I lump these ideas together, when indeed they should really be kept separate and used to do separate work, because all three are used by various authors detailed below as ways to express human dignity in a manner that excludes autistic people. In this paper, I am not arguing that these terms either should or should not be used as markers to moral status or dignity, only that they should not be used so to the exclusion of autistic persons.

⁷ There is no consensus on the appropriate language for talking about autism and I doubt that our terminology will ever be entirely settled. Indeed, it may be more helpful to be continually tasked with checking and contemplating our language use. In this paper I will use both the term 'autism,' which emphasises a unity within the autistic community, and 'the autistic

This argument proceeds in the following order. First, I outline how the appropriation of dialectic personalism, which initiated the relational turn in twentieth century theological anthropology, struggled to escape the capacity or property-based focus on individual subjects. Instead, the capacity for ‘I-Thou’ relationships has merely replaced previous predicates constitutive of persons, such as rationality or self-consciousness. Second, I show that these shifts in theological anthropology occurred in parallel to the diagnosis of autism developed within clinical psychology as an impairment of the precise relational capacities that theologians had set up as spiritually constitutive and theologically essential. As detailed in the third section, it then becomes tragically unsurprising that at the turn of the millennium autistic people have become counter-examples to the norms of theological anthropology. The implication that autistic people may not fully participate in the economy of salvation, or may only do so partially, is clearly an absurd and unacceptable conclusion of these trajectories. Autism may, thus, be constructively integrated into theological anthropology as a helpful restraint against the temptation to ground theological concepts in particular psychological capacities.

***Capax Relationis* and Twentieth Century Theological Anthropology**

Relationality is not a new theme in Christian theology. Yet, it is still possible to speak of something like ‘the turn to relationality’ in the twentieth century as a marked attempt to

spectrum,’ which emphasises the diversity of experiences and differences that autism entails, but this spectrum should not be taken as a hierarchy from less-autistic (‘high-functioning’) to more-autistic (‘severe’), and I will refrain as far as possible from the language of ‘disorders’ and ‘disability’. There is good evidence to suggest that the majority of autistic people prefer identity-first language (‘autistic person’), rather than the people-first conjunction (‘person with autism’), although this preference is not universal. Whilst the ‘people-first’ language is intended to be sensitive and affirming, it can wrongfully imply that one might detach the person from their autism. Moreover, ‘people-first’ language is not often applied with parity; it is more common to write ‘non-autistic person’, rather than ‘person without autism’. As such, the majority of this paper employs identity-first language with the (less colloquial) ‘autistic person’ and ‘autistic persons’ (rather than ‘autistic people’), in order to provide something of a corrective emphasis to the de-personalising treatments of autism discussed in this paper. See, Kenny, L. et al. ‘Which Terms Should Be Used to Describe Autism? Perspective from the UK Autism Community,’ *Autism* 20 (2016), pp.442-62; Grant Macaskill, *Autism and the Church: Bible, Theology, and Community* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), pp.9-10.

forefront the relational resources within historical theology. One important stimulus to this shift in theological anthropology came from the dialogical personalism of scholars such as Ferdinand Ebner, Franz Rosenweig and, most famously, Martin Buber.⁸ The central claim of dialogical personalism is that *the human being is constituted as a person by the encounter with another*: ‘Where there is no “Thou”, there is no “I”.’⁹ It is not relations in general which are essential to personhood, but the particular qualitative relation that exists between two subjects when neither is reduced to an object in the gaze of the other. Thus, the I-Thou relation is defined negatively in contrast to an I-It relation.¹⁰ Dialogical personalism can be understood as a rejection of the ‘turn to the subject’ in transcendental idealism, which in the words of Wolfhart Pannenberg, loses ‘the entire dimension in which the I itself is founded’.¹¹ Deeply influential upon the thought of Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Emil Brunner and other towering twentieth century theologians, the I-Thou continues to have a powerful grip on theological articulations of personhood and other areas of theological anthropology.

The concept of I-Thou relations became foundational for systematic theology more widely through the adoption of the *analogia relationis*.¹² In a bid to avoid the *analogia entis*, the comparison between God and humanity in terms of substances or properties, the *analogia relationis* posits a structural analogy of relations. The I-Thou becomes the common pattern for divine-divine relations in the Trinity, divine-human relationship in salvation, and human-human relationships in general.¹³ It is on the basis of this analogy of relations, rather than any substances, property, or capacity, that the term ‘person’ is applied to both divine and human persons.¹⁴ In the words of Karl Barth, ‘Thus the *tertium comparationis*, the analogy between

⁸ Ferdinand Ebner, *Das Wort und die geistige Realitäten* (Innsbruck: Brenner Verlag, 1921); Franz Rosenzweig, *Der Stern der Erlösung* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Kauffmann Verlag, 1921); Martin Buber, *Ich und Du* (Leipzig: Insel Verlag, 1923).

⁹ Interestingly, a claim first made in Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (ET Harper & Row, New York, 1957), p.92.

¹⁰ Theunissen argued in 1965 that in this purely negative definition, Buber remains a prisoner of the very transcendental philosophy that he seeks to escape. See, Pannenberg, *Anthropology in Theological Perspective*, trans. M.J. O’Connell (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1985), p.181.

¹¹ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, p.181.

¹² *CD III/1*, 192-95 and *CD III/2*, §45.

¹³ This may be seen as one of the motivating doctrines behind the popularity of the social model of the Trinity in recent decades as a response to Western individualism. See Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinitätis und Reich Gottes* (München: Kaiser, 1978); Colin E. Gunton, *The Promise of Trinitarian Theology* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

¹⁴ See, *Persons: Divine and Human* (ed.) Christoph Schwöbel and Colin E. Gunton (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991).

God and man, is simply the existence of the I and the Thou in confrontation.’¹⁵ The suspicion explored in this paper is that the *analogia relationis* does not escape the *analogia entis* and the idea that humanity has properties or attributes analogous to God, but simply specifies one particular property, a capacity for I-Thou relationships, as the ground of personhood, the *imago Dei*, and sanctification.

In order to explore this suspicion, this paper turns to the infamous disagreement between Karl Barth and Emil Brunner. The vast range of theological issues pressed upon and prized open in this controversy (grace and nature, Gospel and law, divine love and divine wrath, to name a few) has meant that this debate echoed throughout twentieth century theology, such that one may doubt that further treatment is warranted. We return briefly to this debate because the divergent ways that Brunner and Barth sought to correlate persons and relations still haunts theology, and theological depictions of autism, today.

Barth and Brunner agreed that the *imago Dei* concerns the relational being of humanity, and it is only in relationship to God that human beings can claim their unique status as persons. The spark that ignited Barth’s ire was Brunner’s concept of the formal *imago Dei*, which humanity retains after the fall as a ‘point of contact’, allowing for ‘the objective possibility of revelation’.¹⁶ Brunner’s intention was to protect the inalienable dignity of human beings, such that although sin has made human beings into ‘anti-personal persons’, personhood itself remains untouched.¹⁷ This approach resonates with contemporary employments of the image of God as a place holder for universal, intrinsic, human value such that certain ethical protections and legal rights are due to human beings as image bearers, and are therefore not due other animals.

Brunner argued that humanity’s special relation to God is retained as a ‘responsible’ creature, or as response-able, through the ‘capacity for speech’ [*Wortmächtigkeit*]. In *Man in Revolt*, Brunner amends his argument to prioritize the relational aspect of the ‘*imago*-origin’, over any account of knowledge. As humanity is called and addressed by God, ‘[h]umanity is distinguished by its active reception of the divine Word’ and the ability to “repeat” the

¹⁵ *CD III/1*, 185. See also, *CD III/2*, pp.247-8.

¹⁶ Emil Brunner & Karl Barth *Natural Theology* (trans) Peter Fraenkel, (intro). John Ballie (London: Geoffrey Bles: The Centenary Press, 1946).

¹⁷ Brunner, ‘Nature and Grace’ p.24; cf. Joan E. O’Donovan, ‘Man in the Image of God: The Disagreement between Barth and Brunner Reconsidered’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, vol. 39, pp.433-459 and 437.

Divine Word in response.¹⁸ Thus, Brunner's central concept did not change radically, but throughout his career a natural capacity for relationships – the property of relationality – remains a prerequisite for the Divine address.

Barth did not reject Brunner's concept of a formal image, *per se*, but argues that the distinction between a formal and material image is untenable. The 'capacity of revelation', Barth argued, must in fact entail some positive knowledge of God apart from grace; the formal image retained a material component. What Barth could not abide was the idea that a natural capacity limits, or sets conditions upon, God's revelation and the scope of God's grace. It is worth noting that the question of disability was not absent from Barth's argument. Barth's focus on humanity's 'impotency' in receiving revelation was also expressed as a concern for those who 'as far as human reason can see, possess neither reason, responsibility, nor ability to make decisions: new-born children and idiots. Are they not children of Adam? Has Christ not died for them?'¹⁹

Joan O'Donovan has pointed out that, in contrast to Barth, Brunner's consideration of those with learning disabilities is worryingly ambiguous. Brunner writes that 'the fact of idiocy shows,' rather than problematizes his argument that, 'without a certain measure of intellectual gifts it is impossible to be human . . . The presupposition for the understanding of the Word of God is the understanding in general, the understanding of words, in the general purely human sense.'²⁰ Whilst Brunner does not make the positive claim that 'idiots' or those without typical use of language (as in the case of non-verbal autism) are not human persons, this is surely the tacit implication. But it is the structure of Brunner's argument here that is most worrying. The idea that those who lack a certain prerequisite for relationship with God 'shows' that such a capacity is indeed essential, is a logic that only proceeds via exclusion. This is an argumentative move that we will encounter again in contemporary theology as detailed below.

The question, then, is does Barth offer theology a way to move beyond Brunner's reliance on human capacities? Barth sought to ground the possibility for revelation, not in any internal capacity but externally and Christologically, in God's pretemporal election that the Word

¹⁸ Brunner, *Man in Revolt* (trans.) Olive Wyon (London: Lutterworth Press, 1939), p.330; O'Donovan, 'Man in the Image of God', p.444.

¹⁹ Barth, 'No!', in *Natural Theology*, pp.88-89.

²⁰ Brunner, *Man in Revolt*, 341; O'Donovan, 'Man in the image of God', p.454

would become incarnate in Jesus Christ as the ‘man for other men’.²¹ Humanity is fundamentally relational, for Barth, because God is fundamentally relational as Trinity.²² Thus, Barth insists that humanity ‘does not first have some kind of nature in which he is then addressed by God.’²³ In this way, Barth clearly sees the need to avoid naming any natural property or capacity as the landing-pad for God’s grace.

Yet, in the constitutive encounter Barth lists four characteristics, which seem to function as criteria, for true being-in-encounter.²⁴ Whilst presented as *a posteriori* evidence for the manifestation of the image of God and personhood, these criteria return Barth’s theological anthropology to the prison of natural capacities.²⁵ First, Barth describes humanity’s distinctive being in encounter as ‘a being in which one man looks at the other in the eye’.²⁶ Second, such encounter ‘consists in that fact that there is mutual speech and hearing’, which third ‘render[s] mutual assistance in the act of being.’²⁷ Most importantly, the being of humanity in encounter ‘consists in being with another gladly’.²⁸ Such gladness we are told is ‘not just an optional addition’ but essential to the relational nature of being human because it denotes a non-hesitant, whole-hearted embrace for the other that could not, in the order of nature, be otherwise.²⁹ In so far as these are behavioural traits typically absent in autism, such criteria leave little space for considering the phenomenon of autism as anything other than sinful, a natural impossibility and a counter-example to the true personhood of humanity.

In the later accounts of relationality in theological anthropology we find the same entrapment of the *capax relationis*; a specific capacity for relationship presupposed as the condition for

²¹ CD III/2, p.208.

²² CD III/4, p.117. Hence Barth’s concern that modern and premodern concepts of persons as defined by ‘the attribute of self-consciousness... complicates the whole issue’ and leaves theologians unable to properly articulate the doctrine of the Trinity. CD I/1, p.357. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pointing me to this passage.

²³ CD III/2, p.150.

²⁴ Mark McInroy argues these four descriptors reveal Barth’s critical, if not subversive, appropriation of Martin Buber’s philosophy and distinguishes Barth from other employments of dialogical personalism in early twentieth century theology. Mark J. McInroy, ‘Karl Barth and personalist philosophy: a critical appropriation’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64(1) (2011), pp.45-63.

²⁵ Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), pp.243-244 and p.251.

²⁶ CD III/2, p.250.

²⁷ CD III/2, p.252 and 260.

²⁸ CD III/2, p.273.

²⁹ McInroy, ‘Karl Barth and personalist philosophy’, pp.60-62.

communion with God and with others. Wolfhart Pannenberg, for example, draws upon social psychologist G.H. Mead to argue that the ‘dialogically structured social sphere’ is ‘constituted by the symbiotic exocentricity of the individual’.³⁰ Therefore, it is the ‘exocentric’ nature of humanity, as the capacity of ‘being present to what is other than the self’ that constitutes the human person.³¹ Exocentricity is further defined as ‘the human ability to understand the gestures or movements of others’ and the empathy that arises in conversation as we put ourselves ‘in the place of others and understand their reactions.’³² Although Pannenberg forefronts the relational, it is grounded in a natural capacity of social understanding and empathy. As described below, these are the precise behaviours that some studies with autism suggest autistic people cannot do.

John Zizioulas championed the Trinitarian basis for the relational turn in late twentieth century theology, perhaps more than any other single theologian.³³ Appropriating again the structural language of dialogical personalism, Zizioulas argues that ‘If we isolate the “I” from the “thou” we lose not only its otherness but also its very being’.³⁴ Therefore, he writes, ‘*To be and to be in relation* becomes identical’ for ‘relating is not consequent upon being, but is being itself’.³⁵

Harriet A. Harris, in an important article, critiqued the then most recent wave of monographs defending the thesis that personhood is relational.³⁶ Harris argued that, whilst relationality is beneficial to the flourishing of personal identity, the idea that relations constitute personhood

³⁰ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, p.237.

³¹ Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, p.85, 109, 187, ‘Egocentricity,’ by contrast is ‘a failure of their [human] existence, their destination as human beings.’ The concept of ‘destination’ and the strongly diachronic articulation of humanity throughout Pannenberg’s work also pushes him towards a developmental account of personhood as a capacity that moves from potency to actuality. Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, p.109.

³² Pannenberg, *Anthropology*, pp.185-187; G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self and Society*, (ed.) C.W. Morris (Chicago, 1934), p.140.

³³ John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir Press, 1985).

³⁴ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p.9.

³⁵ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p.9 and 112; Zizioulas, *Being in Communion*, p.88.

³⁶ Harriet A. Harris, ‘Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 51(2) (1998), pp.214-234. The three monographs that she focuses on were, Alistair I. McFadyen, *The Call to Personhood: A Christian Theology of the Individual in Social Relationships* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); Elaine Graham, *Making the Difference: Gender, Personhood and Theology* (London: Mowbray, 1995); Vincent Brümmer, *The Model of Love: A study in philosophical theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

is not only metaphysically dubious, since ‘persons are ontologically prior to relations’, but ethically ambiguous since personhood becomes ‘a matter of degree dependent on the quality of the relationships formed.’³⁷ The problem Harris highlights is that if relations constitute personhood ontologically, then those who do not have rich interpersonal relationships might not be considered persons, or at least not fully. If the inalienable rights extended to human beings follow from the identification of personhood, then personhood cannot depend upon something as contingent and variable as ethically positive relations.

Harris’ solution is to return to the view whereby relations are consequent upon persons. She suggests, therefore, that personhood is constituted by the *capacity* for personal relationships, regardless of whether or not that capacity is manifest in any particular social context.³⁸ If we read Zizioulas more carefully, it seems that he too remains reliant upon the capacity for relationality. Whereas Pannenberg defines the person as *exocentric*, Zizioulas defines it as ‘ec-static, that is, going outside and beyond the boundaries of the “self”. . . it is a movement of *affirmation of the other*’ and a ‘movement towards communion’ which leads to freedom.³⁹ Hans Reinders has pointed out that this movement is initiated by an agent towards another and so retains ‘a lingering residue of reconstructed subjectivity’ at its centre.⁴⁰ As such Zizioulas fails to be consistent in his rejection of any psychological conditions as prerequisites or causes of personhood (or in his ontological priority of relations over persons). Again, if the capacity for self-initiated movement (Zizioulas), empathy (Pannenberg), linguistic response (Brunner), gladness and eye contact with the other (Barth), are identified as signs of a necessary type of relationship that constitutes personhood, then we have simply turned relationality into an intrinsic, natural capacity, the *capax relationis*. What then becomes of human beings who cannot perform relationships in this particular manner?

A Brief History of Autism

Over the same decades that relationality became central in theological anthropology, psychological research defined autism as, primarily but not entirely, an impairment regarding

³⁷ Harris, ‘Should We Say’, p.227 and 232.

³⁸ Harris, ‘Should We Say’, p.234.

³⁹ Zizioulas, *Communion and Otherness*, p.10 and 213.

⁴⁰ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, p.269.

social interaction.⁴¹ The purpose of this section is to provide a historical overview of how autism has developed as a diagnostic category within psychology and psychiatry, such that the concept of autism now represents a unique challenge to theological anthropology. In particular, the focus on this section is the possible points of crosspollination between theological and psychological trajectories of research. It is important to emphasise, therefore, that many of the accounts of autism detailed in this section are woefully inaccurate, out-of-date, and often do not consider or represent the voice and lived-experience of autistic people. Readers should not confuse this section with an introduction on what autism is, or even how autism is currently understood by healthcare professionals. I will utilize footnotes to point to current research in order to leave readers unfamiliar with autism with a more nuanced and up-to-date impression.

The term ‘autism’ – from the Greek *autos*, meaning ‘self’ – was first used by Dr. Eugen Bleuler in 1911, and entered the English language through a review of his work in the *New York State Hospital Bulletin* in August 1912.⁴² Bleuler also coined the term ‘schizophrenia’, and considered autism one of ‘the four schizophrenias.’⁴³ Whilst Bleuler’s work appears strikingly dissimilar from how the term autism is used today, his influence upon the emerging field of psychology across early-twentieth century Europe is such that one can find many careful clinical descriptions of children who, then diagnosed as schizophrenic, psychotic or (most importantly given Barth’s and Brunner’s use of the term) ‘idiots,’ would likely receive an autism diagnosis today.⁴⁴

⁴¹ The social impairment was long considered the central defining characteristic, even though the *DSM-V* now includes a separate ‘social communication disorder,’ for when a person does not also evidence linguistic deficits, restrictive repetitive and stereotyped patterns of behaviour, and sensory abnormalities necessary for an autism diagnosis. However, it is the sensory differences, rather than the social or linguistic differences, that are becoming increasingly central to contemporary autism research. American Psychiatric Association, *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, Fifth Edition (Arlington, VA: American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

⁴² As we shall see below, the choice of terminology reflects and perpetuates the inaccurate and pernicious idea that the behavioural patterns symptomatic of autism results from a kind of self-centredness or selfishness. This label is inaccurate, and we should seek to distance contemporary use from these etymological origins, understanding ‘autism’ only as a term for this particular condition. Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, p.12.

⁴³ Adam Feinstein, *A History of Autism: Conversations with the Pioneers* (Chichester, UK: Wiley-Blackwell Publishing, 2010), pp.5-6 and 26-27.

⁴⁴ Feinstein, *A History of Autism*, pp.5-7.

Although the terminology and behavioural observations slowly emerged in the first three decades of the twentieth century, it is Hans Asperger's study in 1934 (the same year as the Barth-Brunner exchange explored above) and Leo Kanner's study in 1943 that are widely cited as the foundational studies of the autism spectrum.⁴⁵ It is perhaps of note that Kanner would cite Karl Bonhoeffer, the father of theologian and pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, as his most influential teacher.⁴⁶ From his observation of eleven children in the 1930's, Kanner became convinced that autism was primarily an affective deficit marked 'from the start [by] an *extreme autistic aloneness*'.⁴⁷ Kanner's initial description of autistic behaviour as a tendency to prefer I-It relationships with objects over I-Thou relationships with people, such that a 'profound aloneness dominates all behaviour', captures the central challenge that this (inaccurate, but pervasive) idea of autism presents to relational accounts of theological anthropology.⁴⁸

Whilst Asperger's and Kanner's studies do differ in the descriptions of the linguistic proficiency, intellectual abilities, and fine-motor skills of their subjects, commentators have tended to find the core similarities of their observations and analyses remarkable. For example, Kanner and Asperger both noted the prevalence of autistic males, with Asperger claiming that 'autistic psychopathy is an extreme male variant of masculine intelligence, of masculine character,' which is an idea picked up more recently in Simon Baron-Cohen's controversial *The Essential Difference*.⁴⁹ Importantly in light of what was to follow, and still

⁴⁵ Hans Asperger's study of autism may have been as early as 1934 (the same year as Kanner), as he discusses it in letters to his daughter, Dr. Maria Asperger Felder. Asperger lectured on autism in 1938 in 'Das psychisch abnorme Kind,' *Wiener Klinischen Wochenzeitschrift* 51, pp.1314-1317. However, Asperger did not publish this work formally until 1944 with the paper, 'Die "autistischen Psychopathen" in Kindesalter,' *Archiv für Psychiatrie und Nervenkrankheiten*, 177, pp.76-136, and this paper did not receive international recognition until Lorna Wing translated it into English in 1991. See in Uta Frith, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, trans. Uta Firth (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), pp.37-92. Leo Kanner 'Autistic disturbances of affective contact,' *The Nervous Child* 2 (1943), pp.217-250, is thus still regarded as the ground-breaking publication, which brought the concept of autism to the English speaking world.

⁴⁶ Leo Kanner interviewed by Dr Stafford Ackerly and Dr. Gary May, Louisville, Kentucky, May 15, 1972. John Hopkins Archives. Cited in Feinstein, *A History of Autism*, p.21.

⁴⁷ Kanner, 'Autistic disturbances', p.242.

⁴⁸ Kanner, 'Autistic disturbances', pp.246-247.

⁴⁹ Uta Frith, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome*, pp.84-85; Simon Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference: The truth about the male and female brain* (New York, NY: Perseus Books, 2003). There are now recognised to be a number of problems with the studies conducted by Baron-Cohen in the 1990's, such as a biased, almost entirely male, population base from the Cambridge area. There is now increasing awareness of autism in females, which has been

considered to be true today, both pioneers initially agreed that autism is ‘biologically innate’ or ‘constitutional’, and therefore a lifelong condition.⁵⁰

In the 1950’s and 1960’s the spirit of psychoanalysis which emphasised experiential and environmental factors in psychology, led the study of autism down a destructive wrong turn. Following suggestions made by Kanner, Bruno Bettelheim’s 1967 best-selling book, *The empty fortress: Infantile autism and the birth of self*, argued that autism arose as a maladaptive response to a threatening and unloving family environment, a theory known as the ‘refrigerator mother’.⁵¹ Bettelheim, who had spent nine months in Nazi concentration camps, even made the comparison between some of his fellow camp prisoners and the children he studied after fleeing to America, thereby casting their parents in the role of camp commandants.⁵² The attraction of this misguided theory was the hope that, contrary to biological causes, autism was something that could be cured through psychoanalytic or behavioural therapies, which was one of Bettelheim’s central claims that continues to ignite controversy today. This psychoanalytic approach to autism which saw cold, distant, or abusive parenting as the primary cause has now been widely debunked by the success of biological, neurological, and genetic twin-based studies.⁵³ Yet, since no single explanatory

(and may continue to be) under-diagnosed. Given that the central component of the ‘extreme male brain’ hypothesis concerns the idea that autistic people are incapable of empathy, it is also worth pointing out that this conclusion is undetermined by the data. Where studies do indicate neurological differences in areas that are commonly used by neurotypicals to interpret and respond to the behaviour of others, this does not mean that autistic people cannot feel empathy towards another, nor find alternative neurological pathways for processing a situation and responding to it in an empathetic manner. Again, numerous first person accounts from autistic people testify to the fact that autistic people feel and intentionally act in an empathetic manner. Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, pp.34-35.

⁵⁰ By this I mean to emphasise that autism is neither caused by toxins, parenting styles, demon-possession, or any other post-birth influence, nor is autism curable by therapy, prayer, or exorcism. Although therapy and prayer may have certain benefits to a person’s well-being, an autistic individual is always autistic. Francesca Happé, *Autism: an introduction to psychological theory* (London: UCL Press, 1994), p.11.

⁵¹ The ‘refrigerator mother’ is a phrase coined by Kanner, who told *Time* magazine (July 25, 1960) that the parents of autistic children are ‘cold and rational who just happened to defrost long enough to produce a child’, and in 1973 still wrote that the ‘emotional frigidity in the typical autistic family suggests a dynamic experiential factor in the genesis of the disorder of the child.’ Leo Kanner, *Childhood psychosis: Initial studies and new insights* (Washington, DC: Winston, 1973), 97. Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: Free Press/Macmillan, 1967).

⁵² Bettelheim, *The empty fortress* p.57; Feinstein, *A History of Autism*, p.55.

⁵³ S. Folstein & M. Rutter, ‘Infantile Autism: A genetic study of 21 twin pairs’, *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 18(4) (1977), pp.97-321; A. Bailey et al., ‘Autism as a

framework or underlying cause of autism has been found, this pernicious parent-blaming hypothesis still lingers in some quarters.⁵⁴

The importance of a mother's warmth and reciprocation for an infant's affective development is also found in the mid-twentieth century philosophy of John Macmurray. In his Gifford Lectures, *The Self as Agent* (1957) and *Persons in Relation* (1961), Macmurray argues that 'the field of the personal', which allows human beings to become persons in relation with other persons, is facilitated by this first I-Thou relationship between mother and child.⁵⁵ Macmurray is an influential proponent of personalism and the relational turn in English-speaking philosophical and theological anthropology. In tandem with the (harmful) psychoanalytic approach to autism described above, Macmurray's work also argued for the importance of the mother-child I-Thou relationship for the formation of personhood, as well as emphasising the importance of linguistic communication and shared experience in personal development. Later leading scholars in autism and developmental psychology have turned to this section of Macmurray's work to articulate normal infant development in contrast to autistic development.⁵⁶ It seems that there is a more porous boundary between theological articulations of personalism and research in autism than has previously been recognized.

What is problematic in Macmurray's proposal is that responsibility is placed upon the mother (or care-giver) for the development of the infant's personhood. If the care-giver, for whatever reason, does not establish and sustain an I-Thou relationship with the infant then, the implication is that the child will not develop into full personhood. Alternatively, if the child does not develop with the expected or typical manner of I-Thou relationality, such as eye-

strongly genetic disorder: Evidence from a British twin study,' *Psychological Medicine*, 25(1) (1995), pp.63-77; Tick et al., 'Heritability of autism spectrum disorders: A meta-analysis of twin studies,' *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry* 57(5) (2016), pp.585-95.

⁵⁴ Whilst the data of twin studies and a lack of evidence for any link between parenting styles and autism had led many professionals to abandon the psychoanalytic approach well before Bettelheim's suicide in 1990 (which was followed by a wave of sexual and physical abuse allegations of those under his care), the 1998 statement by the IACAPAP – an international umbrella representing 60 organisations – that 'parents have absolutely no responsibility for their children's autism,' remains something of a landmark.

⁵⁵ John Macmurray, *Persons in Relation: being the Gifford Lectures delivered in the University of Glasgow in 1954* (London: Faber and Faber, 1961).

⁵⁶ R. Peter Hobson, *Autism and the Development of Mind* (Oxford/New York: Routledge, 1993), p.34.

contact or speech, then the implication is that the mother or care-giver is to blame (as Bettelheim argued). The move to turn relationality into a capacity is clearly seen in the notion of potential (as opposed to actual) relationality/personhood and, thus, the possibility of non-development. It is because Macmurray's field of the personal is in fact a capacity to perform or reciprocate human behaviour in a particular way that Macmurray's personalism is discriminatory and implies that some human beings might not develop into persons.⁵⁷

Although the term and diagnosis existed since the beginning of the 20th century, autism research as it is understood today really started to develop in the 1980's by leading figures such as Uta Frith, Alan Leslie, Simon Baron-Cohen, Marian Sigman, Peter Munday and R. Peter Hobson. The goal of much research over the last four-decades has been to find a single or unifying psychological theory that explains the link between neurobiological/genetic differences and the diverse behavioural traits that are used in diagnosis.⁵⁸ One such theory has dominated autism research, namely the idea that the social behaviours associated with autism arise from an impairment or developmental delay to the higher-order Theory of Mind system.⁵⁹ The Theory of Mind module is a theoretical construct used to explain our ability to understand the mental states of others ('mindreading'), as well as the capacity for joint

⁵⁷ This issue is more recently discussed in Susan Grove Eastman, 'The Shadow Side of Second-Personal Engagement: Sin in Paul's Letter to the Romans,' *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5(4) (Winter 2013), pp.125-144.

⁵⁸ Sue Flechter-Watson, S., & Francesca Happé, *Autism: A New Introduction to Psychological Theory and Current Debate* (London/New York: Routledge, 2019), p.68.

⁵⁹ The language of 'impairment' here implies the now-outdated 'primary deficit model', which seeks a single, permanent underlying difference that explains all the diverse features of autism. 'Developmental delay' refers to the 'developmental' approach, which supposes that a more subtle unknown difference causes the brain/body to develop non-typically. The developmental approach remains popular today such that autism is categorised with other neurodevelopmental disorders in the current DSM-V. Unfortunately, the use of older (etymological) notion of autism still influences these developmental theories. For example, some have suggested that atypical development results from a general orientation away from the social content in the world, or even a lack of social motivation and devaluing of other people. The empirical sources of both these theories have been contested by further empirical studies and the increasing awareness of 'camouflaging,' which reveal a very high and often costly motivation among autistic people for greater social interaction. See, W. Jones & A. Klin, 'Attention to eyes is present but in decline in 2-6-month-old infants later diagnosed with autism,' *Nature* 504(7480) (2013), 427; Hirschfield et al. 'Can autistic children predict behaviour by social stereotypes?' *Current Biology*, 17(12) (2007), R451-R452; M.C. Lai, et al, 'Quantifying and exploring camouflaging in men and women with autism,' *Autism*, 21(6) (2017), pp.690-702.

attention, imitation, the recognition of emotion, and empathy ('mentalizing').⁶⁰ Therefore, claiming that people who on behavioural studies do not understand mental states have an impaired Theory of Mind may be entirely correct, but does not offer anything additional in way of explanation.

In the 1990's the Theory of Mind and mentalizing hypotheses were joined with the apparent discovery of 'mirror neurons' in macaque monkeys. The idea of mirror neurons arose from the observation that the same motor neurons fire when performing an action as when observing someone else perform the same action.⁶¹ For two decades, psychologists were hopeful that this discovery would illuminate "the driving force" behind "the great leap forward" in human evolution, 'by accounting for learning through imitation, metaphorical language, and empathy.'⁶² This led to the so-called 'broken mirror' theory of autism, which theologian Eleonore Stump draws upon, arguing that autism results from damage or impairment to the mirror neuron system.⁶³ However, after twenty-five years of the mirror neuron hypothesis, only one single study has claimed to be able to locate a mirror neuron in human beings, giving rise to significant doubt over this whole line of enquiry into human behaviour.⁶⁴ Moreover, the 'broken mirror' theory of autism has been refuted by further empirical testing of this hypothesis.⁶⁵ Both the idea of a 'Theory of Mind' system and the

⁶⁰ Uta Frith, Alan Leslie, and Simon Baron-Cohen 'Does the autistic child have a "theory of mind"?' *Cognition* 21 (1985), pp.37-46. See also, Alan M Leslie, 'Pretence and representation: The origins of "theory of mind"' *Psychological Review* 94 (1987), pp.412-26; Simon Baron-Cohen, *Mindblindness: An Essay on Autism and Theory of Mind* (Cambridge, MA: Bradford/MIT Press, 1995); Uta Frith, *Explaining the Enigma* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989). Francesca Happé, *Autism: an introduction to psychological theory* (London: UCL Press, 1994), pp.35-6.

⁶¹ G. Rizzolatti, et al., 'Premotor Cortex and the Recognition of Motor Actions,' *Brain Research: Cognitive Brain Research* 3(2) (1996), pp.131-41.

⁶² C. Heyes, 'Mesmerising mirror neurons,' *Neuroimage* 51 (2010), pp.789-91.

⁶³ Lindsay M. Oberman and Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, 'Broken Mirrors: A Theory of Autism,' *Scientific American* (1 June 2007).

⁶⁴ J.M Kilner and R.N. Lemon, 'What We Know Currently about Mirror Neurons,' *Current Biology* 23(23) 2013, pp.1057-62; Gregory Hickok, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition* (London: W.W. Norton & Company, 2014).

⁶⁵ Antonia F de C Hamilton, et al., 'Imitation and Action Understanding in Autistic Spectrum Disorders: How Valid is the Hypothesis of a Deficit in the Mirror Neuron System?', *Neuropsychologia* 45(8) (2007), pp.1859-68; Antonia F. de C. Hamilton, 'Reflecting on the mirror neuron system in autism: A systematic review of current theories,' *Developmental Cognitive Neuroscience* 3(1) (2013), pp.91-105.

notion of particular ‘mirror neurons’ provides a theoretical framework for discussing relationality as a psychological mechanism and neurologically grounded capacity.

The porous boundary between the concept of ‘mentalizing’ and religiosity is seen in the prediction, or assumption, that people with autism are less religious.⁶⁶ Other models of autism, such as Uta Frith’s description of the Weak Central Coherence hypothesis also contain such remarks. Frith writes,

In the normal cognitive system, there is a built-in propensity to form coherence over as wide a range of stimuli as possible, and to generalize over as wide a range of contexts as possible. It is this drive that results in grand systems of thought, and ultimately in the world’s great religions. It is this capacity for coherence that is diminished in autistic children. As a result, their information-processing systems, like their very beings, are characterized by detachment.⁶⁷

The implication that autistic brains and religious belief or spirituality are inversely proportional to one another has received some statistical support, but this tells us nothing about any particular individual and, therefore, nothing about the psychological mechanisms involved in an individual person’s belief or unbelief.⁶⁸ One can easily point to the autobiographies of prominent autistic persons, such as Temple Grandin or Daniel Tammet, to find testimony to rich and diverse spiritual lives amongst autistic individuals.⁶⁹

What autism is, in its essence, remains something of a mystery to contemporary medicine. While many theories have been put forward and received some empirical support, no single theory yet explains all four areas in the diagnostic criteria, nor explains the diversity of experiences currently gathered under this umbrella term. It remains contested whether there is

⁶⁶ Ara Norenzayan, et al. ‘Mentalizing Deficits Constrain Belief in a Personal God,’ *PLoS One* 7(5) (2012), e36880; Caldwell-Harris, et al. ‘Religious Belief Systems of Persons with High Functioning Autism,’ 2011.

<http://csjarchive.cogsci.rpi.edu/proceedings/2011/papers/0782/paper0782.pdf>.

⁶⁷ Uta Frith, *Autism: Explaining the Enigma* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989), p.100. Simon Cushing comments that, ‘Perhaps it is the autistic in me that sees the production of the ‘great religions of the world’ as of dubious merit.’ Simon Cushing, ‘Autism: The Very Idea,’ in Jami L. Anderson and Simon Cushing, eds., *The Philosophy of Autism* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), p.43.

⁶⁸ Clark, *God and the Brain*, pp.145-46. Others have questioned this apparent statistical support. See, Paul Reddish, et al. ‘Religious Cognition and Behaviour in Autism: The Role of Mentalizing,’ *The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 26(2) (2016), pp.95-112.

⁶⁹ Clark, *God and the Brain*, pp.151-158.

a single genetic, neurological, or psychological cause that ever could unify the diverse range of behaviours found along a vast ‘spectrum’ currently taken to represent autism.⁷⁰

This ambiguity has led philosopher Simon Cushing to speculate that the single category of ‘autism,’ may turn out to be an unhelpful cluster of specific variations, which will be more accurately and usefully explored separately.⁷¹ This approach has also recently been suggested by Francesca Happé who describes this as the ‘fractionable triad’ hypothesis.⁷² Whilst the specific differences have probably always existed, the idea that these are bundled together into the single condition of ‘autism’, Cushing argues is a relatively recent social construction.⁷³ He points to the parallel of how skin pigmentation, hair type, and facial features have been arbitrarily gathered together to create the social category of race. What Cushing may not realize is that race is also a social category with deep *theological* roots.⁷⁴ Can the same be said for autism? It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue for this stronger thesis. However, it is worth noting that relational accounts of personhood in twentieth century theology and the history of autism as a diagnostic category have developed in parallel such that some cross-fertilization of ideas appears possible, if not probable.

Regardless of this historical question of confluence, the concept of autism represents a particularly challenging phenomenon in a context where theologians employ relationality as the distinctive attribute of personhood. Ironically, this preference for relationality is defended

⁷⁰ Lorna Wing, ‘The continuum of autistic characteristics’, *Diagnosis and Assessment in Autism*, E. Schopler & G.B. Mesibov (ed.) (New York: Plenum Press, 1988), pp.91-110; Simon Baron-Cohen, *Autism and Asperger Syndrome: The Facts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p.93; Cushing, ‘Autism’, p.35.

⁷¹ Cushing, ‘Autism,’ pp.17-45. This idea has also been argued in Mary Coleman (ed.), *The autistic syndromes* (Amsterdam: North-Holland Publishing, 1976) and Robert Chapman, ‘The reality of autism: on the metaphysics of disorder and diversity,’ *Philosophical Psychology* 33(6), 2020, pp.799-819.

⁷² Francesca Happé & A. Ronald, ‘The “fractionable autism triad”: A review of evidence from behavioural, genetic, cognitive, and neural research’, *Neuropsychology Review* 18(4) (2008), pp.287-304; Francesca Happé, et. al., ‘Time to give up on a single explanation for autism’, *Nature Neuroscience*, 9(10) (2006), p.1218.

⁷³ Brian Brock has recently made the similar point that ‘in practice, autism is now regularly deployed more as a label designating a package of therapies offered to certain children rather than an ascription of a rigorously research and definitely understood neurological status.’ Brian Brock *Wondrously Wounded: theology, disability, and the body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019), p.174.

⁷⁴ J. Cameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Willie Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Yale University Press, 2011).

as the ‘inclusive’ option, over and against the rationality that has functioned as a point of exclusion to those with other varieties of cognitive impairment or severe learning disability. The danger, that this paper exposes, is that the theological move from rationality to relationality does not escape the logic of exclusion, but only changes the group of human beings who are excluded. As seen below, this is not merely a risk in light of the trajectories outlined above, but already a reality in recent theological anthropology.

The Exclusion of Persons with Autism in Recent Theology

The confluence of the relational turn in theological anthropology and the growth in research on autism within clinical psychology has led to the problematic employment of autism within theology as *a counter-example* to normative theological accounts of what it means to be human. As seen below, these accounts use different theological concepts to express normative visions of humanity (the language of sin, the image of God, personhood, lifeless faith, or the indwelling of the Holy Spirit). My concern is not with these rich theological concepts directly, but with how autism has been used as a counter-example in explicating their meaning. The tendency to use autism in this diametric manner reveals that ‘the relational turn’ has been less successful than intended in freeing theological anthropology from the thrall of exclusivist thinking. The analysis below draws on the work of seven contemporary theologians, presented in three categories. The first use autism as a paradigm for human sinfulness, the second excludes autistic persons from bearing the *imago Dei*, and the third excludes autistic persons from sanctification. As far as I am aware, these employments of autism have been unnoticed (itself revealing another blind spot within contemporary theology), and so gone unchecked in theological debate.

Autism as Sinful Autonomy

Kevin Vanhoozer, in his entry on theological anthropology in the *Cambridge Companion to Christian Theology*, provides a clear example of how the perceived impairment of social interaction between autistic and non-autistic people is a tempting metaphor for describing humanity’s sinfulness and need for God. Vanhoozer writes,

The attempt to be without God and others (sinful autonomy) leads to autism, that shrivelling of the self to the point of total self-absorption.

Spiritual autism thus characterises a kind of solitary self-confinement that stems from the inability, or the unwillingness, to communicate with others'⁷⁵

Vanhoozer's theological anthropology moves (too) swiftly from psychology to theology, transforming a cognitive and psychological category into a spiritual one. The problematic implication of this transdisciplinary manoeuvre is that persons on the autistic spectrum become paradigms of 'sinful autonomy'. Thomas Berry made much the same move when he wrote that 'In relation to the earth, we have been autistic for centuries.'⁷⁶ Autism is depicted by Berry as an 'inner rage' and, implicitly, as a lack of attention and an unwillingness to respond to the earth's needs.⁷⁷

Contrary to Vanhoozer's and Berry's descriptions, autism is not something which occurs as a result of 'unwillingness' and rebellion. Insofar as the discussion of sin cited here is, even in part, considered a volitional category (as it appears to be), then it cannot be illuminated by an appeal, metaphorical or otherwise, to 'spiritual autism'. Nor does autism produce 'autonomy' but (in a neurotypical world, or when combined with other learning difficulties) rather can result in particular dependencies, sensitivities, vulnerabilities, and need for special provisions.

Autism, Personhood and the imago Dei

The second category takes two examples from the same edited volume exploring the theological implications of neuropsychology. Neuropsychologists Warren S. Brown and Lynn K. Paul argue that personhood is a set of 'core properties of humanness [that] must emerge from complex patterns of physiological interactivity'.⁷⁸ Their hope is to ground the theological concept of personhood in physiology through the philosophy of emergence theory; personhood is seen as an emergent resultant of cerebral functions. This approach to personhood has an immediate risk, since 'abnormalities of cerebral connectivity... will have an impact on the full emergence of personhood.'⁷⁹ The danger is realised when Brown and Paul write that 'autism has been shown to involve diminished long-range cortical

⁷⁵ Vanhoozer, 'Human being, individual and social', p.177.

⁷⁶ Thomas Berry, *The Dream of the Earth* (San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988), p.215.

⁷⁷ Berry, *The Dream of the Earth*, p.215.

⁷⁸ Brown and Paul, 'Brain Connectivity and the Emergence of Capacities of Personhood: Reflections from Callosal Agenesis and Autism', *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?* (ed.) Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), p.104.

⁷⁹ Brown and Paul, 'Brain Connectivity', p.104.

connectivity (as well as increased local connectivity), a neural system disruption that likely contributes to the cognitive and psychosocial difficulties impacting personhood in these individuals.’⁸⁰ On this account, a specific kind of neurodiversity means that personhood, which is identified as the capacity of relationality, is obscured in autistic persons (and other conditions with reduced cortical connectivity).

The logic here suffers from a particularly vicious circularity. The viciousness in this argument is derived not only from presupposing one’s conclusions in the premise but also of building the argument upon a logic of exclusion. Warren and Paul argue for the thesis that human personhood is a set of emergent properties arising from cortical connectivity. In order to establish this thesis, they identify a group of people *without* these emergent properties—namely autistic people—and assert that these individuals are lacking in full personhood. Therefore, they argue, personhood is an emergent property from the brains of people with fully functioning cortical connectivity. But, the exclusion of autistic persons from full personhood is not an acceptable premise, and should undermine their conclusion that these theological categories can be identified as a set of emergent properties, rather than confirm it.

Cognitive evolutionary scientists Justin Barrett and Matthew J. Jarvinen have argued that recent accounts of higher-order Theory of Mind ‘provide fresh perspectives for understanding human uniqueness and *imago Dei*.’⁸¹ As mentioned above, impairment of higher-order Theory of Mind is a popular hypothesis in the contemporary research surrounding autism. Barrett and Jarvinen consciously draw upon the turn to relationality in theological anthropology through the influence of Martin Buber, Karl Barth, and Stanley Grenz. They are also at pains to acknowledge that ‘[h]uman dignity should not be separated into distinct categories of “disabled” and “not disabled”, nor *imago Dei* and only “quasi-*imago Dei*”.’⁸² But I’m unconvinced that this important qualification is sustained by the main argument.

Barrett and Jarvinen argue that the locus of the image of God is the higher-order Theory of Mind, because ‘HO-ToM makes I-Thou relationships possible, both with humans and with God.’⁸³ They acknowledge that HO-ToM is still developing in toddlers, and is not fully

⁸⁰ Brown and Paul, ‘Brain Connectivity’, p.104.

⁸¹ Barrett and Jarvinen ‘Cognitive Evolution, Human Uniqueness, and the *Imago Dei*’, *The Emergence of Personhood: A Quantum Leap?* (ed.) Malcolm Jeeves (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2015), p.163.

⁸² Barrett and Jarvinen ‘Cognitive Evolution’, p.167.

⁸³ Barrett and Jarvinen ‘Cognitive Evolution’, p.171.

functioning in newborn babies, and that there are some individuals – they mention autism explicitly – which never develop a HO-ToM. According to Barrett and Jarvinen, this means that for those on the autistic spectrum the image of God is had by virtue of having a human nature with the (perhaps eschatological) potential to develop the necessary ‘relational capacities.’⁸⁴ Whilst eschatological interpretations of the image of God are a legitimate theological option, such eschatological deferral cannot be posited of one minority group without the consequence that, in this life at least, such persons are positioned as second-class members of the human race. It is also worth noting that this eschatological deferral may be more damning if the lack of the *imago Dei* as the ‘capacity for receiving, experiencing, and being formed through God’s love’ has any bearing upon one’s eternal life.⁸⁵

By building theological accounts of personhood and the *imago Dei* upon a neurological connectivity or a psychological module, which undergirds the human capacity for relationship, these accounts give updated scientific precision to the failure of the relational turn to escape capacity-based accounts of humanity outlined above. Substantive or structural accounts of the image of God have long been critiqued for excluding the vulnerable and oppressed. Vocational or functional accounts easily fall prey to the same exclusion in so far as the activities performed rely on properties and capacities. Here, the same problem arises with relational and eschatological accounts, as the relationship required to identify the image and the eschaton hoped for to restore the image, both presuppose a certain qualitative capacity to relate or reciprocate in this life; a capacity that these proposals explicitly depict autistic people as not having.⁸⁶

Autism, Sanctification, and the Indwelling of the Holy Spirit

The hypotheses of a higher-order Theory of Mind and joint attention take on a deeper theological significance in Andrew Pinsent’s and Eleonore Stump’s accounts of sanctification and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. In a recent monograph, Andrew Pinsent argues that Aquinas’ ethics stand in a sharper discontinuity from Aristotelian ethics than previously recognized. A central pillar of Pinsent’s argument is Aquinas’ use of *gifts* as a necessary theological accompaniment to the successful formation of, not only acquired virtues, but also

⁸⁴ Barrett and Jarvinen ‘Cognitive Evolution’, p.168.

⁸⁵ Barrett and Jarvinen ‘Cognitive Evolution’, p.169.

⁸⁶ For a more promising Christological account, see Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, pp.82-85.

of infused virtues, which signify a person's readiness for heaven. Whilst infused virtues are given by God it is the gifts that 'dispose [one] to be made readily moveable by divine inspiration.'⁸⁷ A gift exists as the foundation (or *principia*) for the infusion of virtue, although both gifts and infused virtues are dispositions or habits from God.⁸⁸ As I understand Pinsent, there are three steps here. First, a gift is needed in order for a person to be moveable by God. Second, the virtue (habit or disposition) moves a person to be orientated towards God. Third, a person is able to perform the occurrent virtuous act.⁸⁹ Pinsent is clear, 'the gifts are essential to salvation... they are intrinsic to perfect human flourishing and not merely instruments to attain that flourishing.'⁹⁰ Gifts, then, form the foundation of Pinsent's theological anthropology and account of sanctification.

Pinsent develops his theological account of gifts through the capacity for *joint attention*, second-person relatedness or Buberian 'I-Thou' relationships. Cognitive scientists describe joint attention as when two people together give attention to an object or to an action that is engaged in jointly (e.g. reciprocal smiling, pre-verbal turn taking, using noises communicatively). For triadic joint attention, the engagement between two subjects and an object requires that the persons 'share an awareness of the sharing of the focus' and share 'an attitude toward the thing or event in question' (e.g. two people looking at a piece of art together or playing a board game).⁹¹ This can also be described as a 'meeting of minds'.⁹² Gifts, then for Pinsent, produce virtues as human's share in joint attention with God towards a certain object or task. Through the gift or disposition of joint attention, a person is influenced by, even

⁸⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, trans. Fathers of the Dominican Province, 5 vols. (Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1948) (hereafter *ST*), 1a2ae, q.68, a.1, quoted in Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.32.

⁸⁸ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.35.

⁸⁹ On Pinsent's account, I argue, the impairment associated with autism does not merely result in an inability to turn an infused habit (disposition, virtue or created grace) into an occurrent act, but the ability to receive a habit/infused virtue/created grace at all. If Pinsent is correct, then this is a far more theologically serious impairment than, for example, other severe cognitive impairments of '*amens*,' that Richard Cross has discussed. For at least Aquinas acknowledges that *amens* can receive the habit of faith, even if they never acted in accordance with that habit. See, Richard Cross, 'Baptism, Faith, and Severe Cognitive Impairment in Some Medieval Theologies', *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 14(4) (Oct. 2012), pp.420-438.

⁹⁰ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.34.

⁹¹ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.43.

⁹² Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.43.

merges with, God's divine perspective.⁹³ Pinsent suggests that this process is what is traditionally known as sanctification.

There is much to be admired in this account of sanctification and Pinsent seeks to ground his proposal in the best psychological research available. However, this is also where we run into trouble since, as he notes, 'a failure to engage in joint attention with other persons is strongly correlated with, and may even specify, an autistic condition.'⁹⁴ Pinsent draws a comparison between his Thomistic account of gifts as that which allows a person to be moved by the Spirit of God and so receive infused virtues, and the empirical studies of R. Peter Hobson who writes that 'children with autism were not moved to adopt the orientation of the person they were watching...They were not "moved".'⁹⁵ In the case of autistic people it seems that there is a group of people who lack the necessary gift, the disposition to be readily moved by God's Spirit, upon which Pinsent builds his theological project. What is most worrisome, however, is that Pinsent frames this example as a benefit, rather than a cost or tension, to his theology. He writes that 'A benefit of establishing a strong correlation between autism and a lack of joint attention is that it is then possible to examine how autistic children perceive and relate to other persons, with a view of highlighting, by means of the contrast, what joint attention normally brings to such relationships.'⁹⁶ In so far as autistic people provide a kind of 'control group' for Pinsent's theology, they are excluded from his account of human flourishing and salvation.

Pinsent uses the psychological category of joint attention to give a concrete account of the type of relationality required for second-personal relations, which are specific kinds of I-Thou relationships widely employed within theological anthropology. The concreteness of this account, however, comes at a cost since the experience of autistic persons can only be used by contrast to the rest of humanity. There is no ambiguity that Pinsent's account excludes autistic persons, and particularly autistic children.⁹⁷ The contrast between those who

⁹³ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, pp.41-44.

⁹⁴ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.45.

⁹⁵ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, pp.47, 49-50. Hobson [n.50]. We might note the intellectual lineage here, as Hobson theory of autism draws on John Macmurray's Gifford lectures, see n.56 above.

⁹⁶ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.45. See the same type of exclusionary logic in Emil Brunner's work, as described above.

⁹⁷ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.61. Pinsent writes, 'to lack the gifts means that one is unable to relate to God in a second-personal way, a condition that can be understood,

have the capacity for joint attention and autistic persons, Pinsent writes, ‘parallels that of living and lifeless faith’.⁹⁸ Since joint attention is necessary if a person is to have a living faith ‘ordered towards divine friendship’, then autism becomes emblematic for what it means to be orientated away from God.⁹⁹ Although Pinsent describes (non-metaphorical) autism as a ‘state of innocence,’ Pinsent also describes sin as ‘metaphorically the onset of “spiritual autism”,’ and the state a person returns to if the gifted virtues are lost through moral rebellion.¹⁰⁰

The theological potential of joint attention for articulating second-personal relations is also developed by Eleonore Stump. Stump elucidates a theology of God’s ‘personal presence’, identified specifically with the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, as ‘presence *with* or a presence *to* another person’, in contrast to mere spatial-temporal presence *in* a place or *at* a time.¹⁰¹ Personal presence, we are told, comes in degrees of empathy and mindreading, whereby ‘one can somehow sense as internal to one’s own psychology another person’s intentions or emotions.’¹⁰² Given the higher-order Theory of Mind employed here it is unsurprising that

metaphorically, by consideration of what specifies autistic spectrum disorder in human relations.’ It is not clear to me what the qualifier ‘metaphorical’ means in this sentence, since no positive statement is made that (non-metaphorical) autistic people can enjoy joint attention and second-personal relationships (friendship) with God and no alternative metaphor or account of gifts is given at any point.

⁹⁸ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, pp.69-70

⁹⁹ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.70.

¹⁰⁰ Pinsent, *The Second-Person Perspective*, p.70 and 100. In a later publication, Pinsent returns to this idea of ‘*spiritual autism*’ and those who are ‘*spiritually autistic*’ as comparable to the ‘ungraced innocents’ who are in limbo (or *faerie*, as Pinsent prefers). In this paper, Pinsent makes a number of clarifications regarding his employment of autism, such as emphasising the metaphorical nature of this language (comparable with ‘blindness’ in older literature), acknowledging the wide spectrum of autistic capabilities, and making explicit that ‘spiritual autism is not the condition of a minority but is as universal as the original to sin to which it is attributed. Nor should this term be taken as implying that those with physical ASD are in an unusually disadvantaged spiritual state.’ More promisingly, he acknowledges that ‘physical ASD’ may have some spiritual advantages so this ‘state is not one of regret’ and includes some quotations from the autistic community. However, autistic persons still exemplify a second-class kind of existence (as akin to ungraced innocence in limbo) that, in Pinsent’s words, remain ‘clearly different from that of the saints,’ even if this immediately qualified as ‘not a matter of regret or isolation.’ The question of whether physical autism prevents the Spirit from creating a post-baptismal second-personal relation with God remains, for me, worryingly ambiguous. Andrew Pinsent, ‘Limbo and the Children of *Faerie*’, *Faith and Philosophy*, 33.3 (2016), pp.293-310, esp. pp.304-305.

¹⁰¹ Eleonore Stump, ‘Omnipresence, Indwelling, and the Second-Personal’, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 5/4 (Winter 2013), pp.29-53, at pp.29-30.

¹⁰² Stump, ‘Omnipresence’, p.30.

Stump defines joint attention, empathy and mindreading as activities which persons with autism cannot do.¹⁰³ In so far as Stump accurately follows the diagnostic criteria of autism spectrum impairments this need not be troubling (even if future autism research comes to reject these models). It is with the construction of a model for the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, whereby a (neurotypical) person shares in the mind of Christ through these specific tools of social cognition (such as mirror neurons) that problems start to emerge.¹⁰⁴ Stump's model makes a subtle, but potentially devastating, shift from an empirical description which proceeds by contrasting autistic persons from non-autistic persons in psychology, to a theological construction that then excludes autistic people from personal presence and personal relationship with God. In the work of considering God and all things in relation to God, theology cannot escape the normativity of its claims. Stump never explicitly denies that autistic people may participate in the fullness of grace, and one hopes that she would affirm that this occurs by some other means and then reflect on how this qualification can be accommodated in her theological proposal. However, her silence in this regard and the possibility that this exclusion may challenge her account more widely is problematic.

It seems that the word 'autism' in contemporary theology is in danger of becoming detached from the signified – the people who are autistic – and instead, operating within a system of theological discourse only as a term of differentiation and exclusion. As we continue to define concepts such as 'person', 'image-bearer', 'saint' or persons sanctified and indwelt by the Holy Spirit, as the sort of things that automatically enter I-Thou, second-personal relationships, we are in danger of defining these central, normative concepts as *not-autistic*. Post-structural theorist Margaret Archer notes that this kind of contrastive exclusion of meaning-making is not an 'intentional conspiracy', but the result of focused attention, in this case, on a particular type of relationality.¹⁰⁵ Archer notes that the more attention given, and the more entrenched the ideas, the more pronounced and deliberate the exclusion. This is what has happened in the case of autism; autism may have been implicitly problematic in Barth's and Brunner's consideration of 'the idiot' who cannot form 'I-Thou' relationships,

¹⁰³ It is worth noting that, an implication of Stump's account is that, without Jesus' mirror-neurons God could also not enjoy second-personal knowledge, personal presence, or empathy.

¹⁰⁴ See also, Eleonore Stump, 'Modes of Knowing: Autism, Fiction and Second-Personal Perspectives', *Faith & Philosophy* 26(5), (2009), pp.553-565.

¹⁰⁵ Margaret S. Archer, *Culture and Agency: The Place of Culture in Social Theory* (Cambridge: CUP, 1988), p.181.

and they are now more explicitly excluded in contemporary literature as focused work on joint attention, Theory of Mind, and other cognitive mechanisms are used to articulate the normative form of human existence. The instability of this way of giving meaning to theological concepts – person, image of God, sanctification, etc - is immediately apparent when one considers the reality of autistic Christians. The theological anthropologies outlined above can provide no place for Christians who are also autistic, and they thereby fail to testify to a God who offers salvation to all. Such an unravelling of meaning in endless destabilising exclusions, Ian McFarland argues, is only halted by the person of Jesus Christ who is his own Other; ‘In order to know whom the risen Lord is, the reader of the New Testament is driven to examine the one he is ‘not’ – the dead Jesus who hangs on the cross.’¹⁰⁶ In order to know what it means to relate to God we may need to learn from those amongst us who relate differently.

Conclusion

The argument above unpicks how and why autism presents a unique challenge to the relational turn in theological anthropology. The failure of relational accounts of humanity to escape the method of defining personhood according to natural properties has meant that instead we have come to specify the capacity for relationality as constitutive of personhood, the image of God, and the possibility for sanctification. In so far as autistic spectrum disorders are primarily defined by a neurologically grounded impairment in social interaction, the failure of the relational turn prohibits positive theological treatments of autistic persons.

In his famous essay, ‘Are All Human Beings Persons?’, Robert Spaemann not only answers affirmatively, but argues that those with impairments, who cannot manifest any of the properties which we have traditionally predicated of personhood, are ‘the acid test of *our* humanity’ and the ‘paradigm for a human community of recognizing selves, rather than simply valuing useful or attractive properties.’¹⁰⁷ It is not the personhood of the disabled that

¹⁰⁶ Ian McFarland, ‘Personhood and the problem of the other’, *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 54(2) (2001), p.212.

¹⁰⁷ Spaemann, *Persons*, p.243. Italics added. Spaemann’s proposal is to remove all capacity, property, or potentiality talk from notions of personhood. Instead, he grounds personhood in objective biological relations (being a member of the human species) quite apart from the acceptance or recognition of other members of the species or the development into a mature

is truly in question here, but the way theologians apply concepts like personhood, image of God, and the possibility of salvation to everybody. If we fail to recognize the membership of the impaired or the different, then we are either creating a second-class of human to whom the ethical imperatives that normally accompany notions of personhood and the image of God in modern discourse do not apply, or we are limiting the Spirit of God to relate only to those with typical neurology. Neither of these outcomes seem very promising for contemporary theology.¹⁰⁸ Spaemann summarizes that what disabled persons ‘give to humanity in this way by demands they make upon it is more than what they receive.’¹⁰⁹ This is apparent in a small way in this paper, as the exposure and restraint that persons with autism give to relational accounts of theological anthropology.

Autistic people witness to the fact that my own theological status is not contingent upon exocentricity, ecstatic existence, a formal image, or upon the freedom of gladness. Within twentieth century theology, each of these has designated some natural precondition or created ability to relate to God. The relational turn has been built upon a *capax relationis*, a capacity for relationality. The diagnostic definition autism as an impairment in social cognition and relationality makes it unsurprising (but by no means inevitable) that by the turn of the millennium autism and relational theological anthropologies collided. The use of autism within recent theology, as a paradigm for sinfulness, as a group of people excluded from full personhood, the image of God, and sanctification, results from the tenacity of capacity-based thinking even within relational accounts of theological anthropology.

If these central theological realities do rely upon human capacities, then to seek insights from psychology, neurology, or other medical disciplines is both wise and humble. However, since progress in these disciplines is often achieved by contrasting the abilities and impairments of different groups then we should not be surprised that transposing this knowledge into theology comes at the significant, indeed unacceptable, cost of denying that personhood, the image of God, and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit are equally available to all. The mistake does not lie in engagement with contemporary scientific knowledge, but in the assumption

adult. Interestingly, Grant Macaskill hints at something similar when he writes, ‘The lambs are members of the flock, even if only because they continue to be bound to their mother, rather than because they have learned to follow the voice of the Shepherd.... The lambs are part of the flock, regardless of their state of cognitive development.’ Macaskill, *Autism and the Church*, p.197.

¹⁰⁸ Reader might take this sentence as an example of British understatement.

¹⁰⁹ Spaemann, *Persons*, p.244.

that these theological realities are dependent upon the human capacities identified by these empirical studies.