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Horizons of Hope: Disability, Eschatology, and the Work of the Holy Spirit

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ABSTRACT

In this paper I propose a model of disability which synthesizes Amos Yong's disability theology with Elizabeth Barnes's "value-neutral model" of disability and then draws Sarah Coakley's account of ante-mortem/post-mortem bodily fluidity in with both. To construct this model, I first outline Yong's thought and then introduce Barnes's work to it as a pivot point around which its eschatological imagery can turn. I then address Coakley's work on bodily fluidity regarding gender and apply it to disability to reveal the model's capacity to hold theological clarity and mystery in tension successfully.

KEYWORDS

difference; disability; eschatology; identity; value-neutral

Introduction

Ongoing advances in disability theology have pressed toward conceptualizations of disability which are thoroughly rooted in the lived experiences of disabled persons rather than being mere academic conjecture. Thought experiments and hypotheticals alone are often incapable of getting at the realities of, for example, parenting a child with significant intellectual or physical disabilities. Such is additionally, and especially, the case when considering the Christian hope for the resurrection of the body. After all, expectations for the future renewal of human existence at present can easily fall into vain speculation. However, there is also a risk in disability theology that we unnecessarily lack conceptual clarity or appeal too easily to mystery. One particularly notable example of this difficulty can be found in the preeminent work of Amos Yong.¹

Yong does well when he adopts a clear, broad definition of disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (2009, p. 56).² And yet when he approaches eschatology this *definitional* clarity alone is not enough to provide significant

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conceptual clarity to the resurrection hope which he rightly emphasizes. Yong argues variously *that* at least some disabilities will persist in the eschaton—in particular, those he views as necessary for the continuity of personal identity³ between pre-resurrection and post-resurrection individuals—(Yong, 2007b, Ch. 9; particularly pp. 281–292), but his sense of *what* it is that both needs to be and will be preserved for resurrected persons in the “eschatological long run” (Yong, 2007a) is often vague. Moreover, the *how* of disability’s persistence in the resurrection is also vigorously affirmed yet mysteriously described throughout Yong’s work. Though he says the Holy Spirit pneumatologically transforms us, in what way that transformation might be instantiated can be unclear. Some mystery is, of course, likely to be requisite in any thoroughly honest eschatology,⁴ but I contend that there are means available to keep the good of Yong’s approach to disability while ensuring the account does not become *overly* mysterious.

Yong has already been pressed on these issues to a certain extent (e.g., Mullins 2011), but to date the heart of such difficulties for his work has been unaddressed. Namely, nobody has scrutinized the definition of disability which Yong deploys in his work and the ways in which a substitute for it might aid in attaining his overarching theological goals. As such, in this paper I propose a model of disability which synthesizes Amos Yong’s disability theology with Elizabeth Barnes’s “value-neutral model” (2016, Ch. 3) of disability and then draws Sarah Coakley’s account of ante-mortem/post-mortem bodily fluidity in with both. This model, here termed the Eschatological (Dis)Continuity Model or E(D)CM,⁵ provides a clearer picture consistent with Yong’s thought of both *what* it is that is retained by resurrected disabled persons and *how* the persistence of their disabilities occurs without impinging upon the new creation’s perfect joy. To construct this model, I first outline Yong’s bodily grounded disability theology and then introduce Barnes’s value-neutrality for disability to it as a pivot point around which its eschatological imagery can turn. I then address Sarah Coakley’s work on the fluid nature of embodiment regarding gender and apply it to disability to reveal the model’s ability to hold in successful tension the clarity of an adequate theological model and the mystery of an honest one.

Yong and Barnes on disability

Yong, disability, and resurrection

At the outset of any engagement with Yong’s theology of disability it is important to note the particularly personal mode in which he conducts his work. At the heart of his efforts sits his brother Mark, who has Down syndrome. Each chapter of his influential *Theology and Down Syndrome* begins with a reflection upon his experiences of and with Mark. Yong’s

love for his brother is evident throughout both this volume and elsewhere where Mark is mentioned (e.g., 2011, Ch. 1), and it is this care not only, but especially, for his disabled brother that drives Yong's efforts. That said, he admits that he has "not had extensive interaction with people with Down Syndrome other than growing up as a sibling of a younger brother" (2007b, p. 9), and so he is careful to delineate the position of these efforts within disability theorizing and advocacy so as to not fall into "either 'gazing' or 'eavesdropping' on the lives of people with disabilities" (2007b, p. 9). Instead, he understands his work to be "contributing to social change indirectly more through the raising of public (especially ecclesial) consciousness than through working directly with people with intellectual disabilities" (2007b, p. 10). As such, his disability theology is not primarily homed within the bounds of *practical* theology but *systematic* theology and Yong, in understanding his work as such, clearly has a place there for such things as careful conceptual work.⁶

I highlight the above in order to show that, by all accounts, Yong's intention is to provide a theologically informed account of disability which both respects the lived experiences of disabled persons and provides a cogent reckoning of how it might be the case that disability could persist in the eschaton. On this first point he seems to succeed. Throughout his work on disability, Yong endeavors to give direct attention to the testimony of disabled persons and those with whom they are closest (family, friends, carers, and so forth) to allow what they say to be centered in his more theoretical efforts.⁷ But on this second point, that of conceptual clarity, Yong's success is less clear. This is not to say that he outright fails in his task! However, when it comes time for him to express what exactly one might expect for disability eschatologically it seems to me that what he offers is muddier than it need be. He is clear that he intends to argue that "there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the lives of people with disabilities" (2011, p. 118) and so we ought to reconsider the typical assumption in much of Christian theology that disability will simply be eliminated with the resurrection of the body (2007b, pp. 265–266). But when it comes time to describe what disabled resurrection bodies might look like or entail he comes up somewhat short.

Recall his definition of disability as "any restriction or lack (resulting from an impairment) of ability to perform an activity in a manner or within the range considered normal for a human being" (2009, p. 56). Now, consider what he offers elsewhere as a description for what eschatological disability might be imagined to be:

Deceased infants—whether healthy, microencephalitic, or otherwise disabled, whether dead from natural or other causes—would have a glorious and powerful resurrection body not measured by Arnold Schwarzenegger or Miss U.S.A in their prime but by

their nestedness in the communion of saints and by the redemptive caregiving in the eschatological community. Hence there is continuity and discontinuity with the resurrection body: on the one hand, infants are recognizably infants in the eschaton, although, on the other hand, their bodies are no longer subject to decay even as we are unable fully to anticipate the mysterious transformation of the resurrection body. But the work of the eschatological Spirit also means that infants do not stay infants eternally, but are unendingly transformed along with other members of the eschatological community in and toward the triune God (2007b, p. 282).

This passage is worth quoting at length because it is perhaps the most powerful image of resurrected disability that Yong provides. And yet, there are at least two problems on display with this proposal. First, the way in which the continuity/discontinuity which Yong describes above appears at risk of slipping away from a description of genuine tension and into a simple incoherence. Second, it is puzzling how disabled persons, so transformed as he describes, still actually count as disabled in the eschaton.

Regarding the first of these difficulties, Yong writes that “because the meanings of our lives are constituted by but irreducible to our bodies, so also will the resurrected body be the site through which the meaning of our narratives are transformed (and that, eternally)” (2007b, p. 283). His notion of human identity hinges on a framework which understands that “human souls are emergent from and constituted by human bodies and brains without being reducible to the sum of these biological parts” (2007b, p. 188).⁸ Additionally, and though he does “not claim that all disabilities are identity conferring” (2012, p. 5), at least some disabilities do bear so heavily upon one’s personal identity that he finds it challenging to imagine how they could be removed without eliminating that particular person. As such, the continuity of at least some disabilities in the eschaton matters for making sure that everyone who experiences the resurrection of the body actually experiences it themselves and not only as a precursor to the one who is actually redeemed.⁹ But how should we suppose this works for disabled persons? In keeping with his own example of a resurrected microencephalic infant, how is it the case that they could genuinely experience microcephaly and yet have a “powerful” resurrection body? It seems that the two states of being are just fundamentally at odds, meaning that what we would have here is not an example of eschatological tension but impossible contradiction. In other places Yong avers that what is most central to his account is that the *marks* of disability remain in the eschaton (e.g., Yong, 2011, pp. 125–130; Yong, 2012, p. 5), but this point just leads us into the second of our two concerns here.

Though he elaborates that the “marks” of disability include, but are not limited to, such things as “phenotypical appearances, mental capacities, behavioral expressions, and verbal, emotional, and interpersonal traits among other perceivable—whether visually or audibly—features that emerge

from and express human identities across the lifespan” (2012, p. 5), it is unclear how one can retain such features while being so radically transformed as his eschatological vision entails and still actually *be* disabled. Consider Down syndrome as an example since Yong understands it to be an identity-conferring disability (Yong, 2007b, pp. 269–270; Yong, 2011, p. 121). He would appear to suggest that a person with Down syndrome is resurrected with both the same bodily and mental features which were theirs pre-eschaton while also having those features changed intrinsically (i.e., as pertains to them alone) and extrinsically (i.e., as pertains to their membership in the relationally perfected community of the saints). As such, there are no more deficits, pain, and so forth that come with being a resurrected disabled person in the way that there can be with pre-resurrection disability (e.g., the heart issues that are common in Down syndrome children, which often must be surgically corrected).¹⁰ But Yong’s definition of disability is based precisely on such things! It is “impairment” or “lack” that delimits disability from non-disability, and so, if it is even possible that the sort of marks he describes do persist alongside profound transformation of the sort he describes, can we even call this person disabled any longer? It looks like what might happen on Yong’s account is not that disability is actually preserved in the eschaton but just that it is removed in a different sense or at a different rate than traditional notions of the resurrection have suspected.

That said, neither of these issues are terminal for Yong’s disability theology or its eschatological musings. Both are the result of a lack of clarity in his work rather than a formal deficit and, therefore, simply require further elaboration to be addressed. At their root is Yong’s definition of disability itself, for it is this definition of disability (which rests on criteria like impairment in marking out its subjects) that ends up causing issues when it is stretched too far ahead of the present into the days of the resurrection. What is needed, then, is a new definition of disability which can be slotted into this theological vision so that downstream problems like the two observed here can be avoided. It is here that the thoroughly non-theological work of Elizabeth Barnes becomes useful to this overtly theological exercise.

Barnes and the value-neutral model

Working at the intersection of disability, feminist philosophy, and metaphysics, Barnes proposes what she terms the “value-neutral model” (2016, Ch. 3)¹¹ of disability. Elsewhere she has written that “in philosophical discussions of health, no single idea has been more influential than the concept of ‘normal function’” (2020, p. 5). Normal function views of wellbeing generally take it as a given that “statistical typicality” (2020, p.

7) is preferable unless one's abnormal state somehow increases their abilities.¹² Such perspectives will largely understand disability to be an instance of embodied bad-difference, but Barnes's argues against this view and suggests instead that we take a mere-difference view of disability. She writes that "having a disability is something that makes you different, but not something that by itself makes you worse off because of that difference" (2016, p. 78).¹³ Note, however, that she does not mean to say that being disabled cannot ever mean that there are bad effects or outcomes that come with being a disabled person. It is just the case that *being disabled* is not the badness-making property in such instances. This may strike us as odd in many cases given that there seem to be some disabilities which are bad-difference makers in themselves.

Consider cystic fibrosis (CF) as an example: how can the progressive accumulation of material in the lungs which is typical of CF be a global mere-difference and not a global *bad*-difference? After all, global differences are differences which have an effect on one's overall well-being (Barnes, 2016, pp. 81–82), so it seems like CF would be an example of a global bad-difference. To begin here, we can first look more closely at Barnes's distinction between bad-difference and mere-difference views of disability.¹⁴ She writes that the former claim that "disability has a negative effect on well-being that is counterfactually stable—disability would have such effect (sic) even in the absence of ableism" (2016, p. 60) whereas the latter suggests there is "no such negative connection between disability and well-being" (2016, p. 60). Looking to CF again, we might initially think that it is a disability whose badness is counterfactually stable as it looks like in any possible world it is bad for one's body to function in the way that CF makes it function. But let us look more closely at what is the proximate cause of the badness here. Said badness is the difficulty breathing, increased likelihood of respiratory illness (e.g., pneumonia), and so forth which comes with the increase of material in one's lungs that CF brings. Imagine, though, that medical researchers and physicians were to devise a course of treatment for CF which makes it such that this extra material in the lungs does not result in difficulty breathing, increased likelihood of respiratory illness, and so forth. Further, imagine that this treatment is freely and readily available to all persons with CF across the globe. Such a hypothetical helps us to see that it is not actually CF intrinsically that is the badness-making property but the increase of material in one's lungs in conjunction with a lack of adequate treatment options for CF patients. As such, in this scenario CF turns out to be a mere-difference maker rather than a bad-difference maker.¹⁵

This is not mere hairsplitting either! It may seem to be in the case of CF given that it seems unlikely most people with it would prefer the sort of imaginary course of treatment I have just described as opposed to a

simple cure (barring issues of cost, side effects, etc. which might impact their decision), but it is an illustrative example for that reason. If, even in the case of a disability which seems a poor candidate for the sort of identity-making qualities Yong is concerned about, we can readily conjure up a scenario in which the disability itself would not be a bad-difference but only a mere-difference then we are better enabled to reflect further on disabilities like Down syndrome, autism, and other more challenging cases. From this perspective, the following claim from Barnes's is easier to swallow than our intuitions might otherwise permit it to be: "disability is neutral simpliciter. It can sometimes be bad for you—depending on what (intrinsic or extrinsic) factors it is combined with. But it can also, in different combinations, be good for you. And all of that is compatible with disabilities sometimes—perhaps always—being *locally* bad for you (that is, bad for you with respect to particular things or particular times" (2016, p. 88). This is the core contention of her value-neutral model of disability, and it all seems to be compatible with what Yong is after. However, we have yet to lay out Barnes's specific definition of disability, and that will be the greater determiner of what amelioratory role her work can play.

Barnes's definition of disability is based on two necessary conditions:

A person S, is physically disabled in a context, C, iff:¹⁶

- i. S is in some bodily state x
- ii. The rules for making judgements about solidarity employed by the disability rights movement classify x in a context C as among the physical conditions that they are seeking to promote justice for (2016, 46).

Note that Barnes only aims to treat *physical* disability here in the interest of scope, but she adds "I take no stand on whether what I say here will generalize to other forms of disability" (2016, p. 10), and so we are not precluded from expanding said scope. Elaborating on this definition, she writes that its idea, "in a nutshell" (2016, p. 46), is that a group of people who have otherwise disparate conditions impacting their bodies see between them shared experiences of stigma, ostracization, disenfranchisement, and so forth which bind them to one another even in their difference. "And so despite having very different bodies, it made sense to think of themselves as working toward a common goal" (2016, p. 46). Doing this explicitly involves "judgements of solidarity (shared experience, shared struggle, shared goals). Those judgements of commonality are (implicitly) rule-based. The application of those rules determines what counts as a disability." So, at bottom for Barnes, to be disabled is just to have the sort of body which the disability community counts as a member of itself. And yet, we might wonder at this junction whether

something has gone terribly wrong as (ii) seems to make her definition of disability terribly circular and vague.

But Barnes is prepared for this objection. Moreover, she counts circularity¹⁷ as something to be avoided as much as is possible in this task, and so she replies that she does not “think that the use of the term ‘disability’ is enough to render the account circular. Civil rights movements are individuated by what they do, not by their names” (2016, p. 48). She acknowledges that her “account appeals to *the* disability rights movement as though it was a single thing. That’s a convenient simplification—but it’s also an oversimplification” (2016, p. 49).¹⁸ Barnes continues that she has no “underlying theory of civil rights movements to offer” (2016, 49) and so she is content to either say that there are, in fact, numerous disability rights movements which should be considered here or, perhaps, that “it’s simply vague or indeterminate which social group is referred to by ‘the disability rights movement’” (2016, p. 49). Moving to more specific responses to this issue, however, she offers two avenues which might be pursued.¹⁹ The first is to allow “that there are many different (perhaps overlapping) social groups and that ‘the disability rights movement’ picks out different ones in different contexts... We could then adopt David Lewis’s famous solution to the problem of the many—there are many social categories here, but there is *almost* one” (2016, p. 49).²⁰ As such, determining which one gets the name “disability rights movement” in a particular context will be up to us rather than an external abstraction of *the* “disability rights movement.” Rephrasing Lewis, she writes that “we cannot deny the arbitrariness. What we can deny, though, is that it is trouble” (2016, p. 49). And so, Barnes thinks it possible that, in this Lewisian mode, we can still do philosophy of disability because “although there’s no one thing that uniquely counts as disability, the differences between candidates are philosophically insignificant” (2016, 49).²¹ However, this is not her preferred reply of the two.

Barnes is instead more inclined to simply say that it is possible that

this entire domain (like most any aspect of social ontology) is riddled with indeterminacy. It’s indeterminate which social group should count as the disability rights movement (it’s indeterminate what the group’s members are, what its membership conditions are, what its temporal and cross-cultural extension is, etc.)... But rather than being a problem, I think that’s exactly what we should expect for a category as messy as disability. I don’t want to take a view here on what the best thing to say about such indeterminacy is. I just want to register that I don’t see it as a drawback of the view. Indeed it would strike me as deeply implausible that any aspect of our complex, multifaceted social reality had fully determinate boundaries (2016, pp. 49–50).

Further, and as she gestures toward (2016, pp. 50–53), the disability rights movement is not the only social group which exhibits this sort of

indeterminacy in its conditions for membership. For present purposes, then, let us simply *assume* that she is right about her theory of disability not being inherently self-defeating so that we can move onward toward seeing the potential goods it might bear for Yong's disability theology.

Coakley, gender, and the priority of the Spirit

Before knitting together the disability theology of Yong with the disability theory of Barnes it becomes necessary to bring in one more contributor whose work will have luminary value for this paper's constructive efforts. Namely, Sarah Coakley and her reflections on the role of the Holy Spirit in transforming human persons eschatologically. What Coakley offers on this topic pertains particularly to the transformation of gender, but I will show in the following section how these contributions are of use in our thinking on disability as well.²² To start with, it should be noted that even though Coakley (2013, p. 34) calls for a "robustly theological, indeed precisely *trinitarian*, perspective on gender" she does not propound a thick ontology of it. That is to say, for Coakley gender is less about metaphysical conditions or embodied characteristics (though both do play roles in what she offers) than it is about one's relationality with God as a beloved creature.

Therein, she emphasizes the notion of "divine *interruption*" (Coakley, 2011, p. 18)²³ in which God breaks down humanly imposed distinctions between male and female humans, particularly as regards their perceived roles in the world. For example, consider her analysis of Gregory Nyssen's perspective on which "both originally and ultimately... the human person is what one might call 'humanoid' (or perhaps, 'angeloid')—neither male nor female in any commonly accepted sense" (2013, p. 281).²⁴ Interestingly, as she comments elsewhere, such is not to say that this vision is one of simple androgyny on which gender differences are just eliminated. "Rather, as advances are made in the stages of virtue and contemplation, *eros* finds its truer meaning in God, and gender switches and reversals attend the stages of ascent: the increasingly close relation to Christ marks... a shift from active courting of Christ as 'Sophia' to passive reception of embraces of Christ as the bridegroom" (2002, p. 165).²⁵ Coakley does not mean here to in some way enforce or commend the stereotyping of femininity as receptive and masculinity as active.²⁶ Instead, what she means is to point toward is the character of the "eschatological horizon" (Coakley, 2002, p. 166) as "one in which the restless, fluid post-modern 'body' can find some sense of completion without losing its mystery, without succumbing to 'appropriate' or restrictive gender roles" (Coakley, 2002, p. 166). It is this sense of completion coincident with mystery that I am particularly interested in at present.

Coakley suggests that we should anticipate an eschaton which is thoroughly embodied in such a way that the tropes and trials which seem now to “naturally” extend from maleness and femaleness fall away. Put differently, she thinks of our end as one in which we are given the grace of “a final withdrawal from the whirligig of marriage, child-rearing, the quest for social status and financial security” (2002, p. 162). What this tells us about gender, insofar as Coakley understands it, is that while embodied characteristics (e.g., human sexual dimorphism) do matter and are a part of God’s good creation, it is their ability to point us beyond ourselves and back into the inner life of our Creator which is fundamental and not their roles, modes or expressions of being, and so forth (2013, p. 53). So, we need a theological sense of gender because it is important as a category of what it means to be human. “To fail to chart the differences and performances of gender would be to ignore one of the most profound aspects of human experience, whether felt as a joy or a curse” (2013, p. 53). Gender is, for her, a kind of liminal category “where the miracle of divine enfleshment challenges and undercuts the rigid orderings of the world” (Coakley, 2015, p. 83). In other words, the incarnation reveals to us something about the true nature of gender.

Though Christ is, by all accounts,²⁷ a male in his humanity he also subverts various expectations of his day in the way he expresses his maleness. He is celibate despite societal pressure for men to continue their family lines, he does not take up his father’s trade but is a wanderer, and he forges uncommonly close relationships with women like Mary Magdalene, to name a few examples.²⁸ And yet this does not seem to discomfort the incarnate Lord or call his maleness into question. Rather, he is simply being and interacting with others through his own embodied particularity in the way which God desires for him so to do. His maleness is, therefore, liminal in its being a point of his interfacing with other embodied, fleshy persons around him, and it also crosses various expectational borders for what maleness ought to be. Coakley writes of experiencing this reality in her role as a priest, saying in an interview with Rupert Shortt that

one of the most fascinating things about being in some sense *in persona Christi* at the altar is that one finds oneself at some points in the service... kneeling on behalf of the laity—and thus *qua* “feminine” in the terms of the traditional nuptial heart of the eucharist (see Ephesians 5:21 ff.)—and so representing the Church. But then when one turns to bless or to absolve or to offer the elements to the people, one’s crossing the liminal boundary to the divine side of things; now one is standing in the realm of Christ as the divine love, *qua* “masculine.” One is symbolically moving from one gender role to another, and so implicitly “destabilizing” the poles at the same time (Coakley, 2005, p. 79).

She reflects on this sort of gendering elsewhere as different from worldly impositions of gendered labels because of “its welcoming of the primary

interruption of the Spirit, and its submission to contemplative unknowing so that the certainties of this world (including the supposed certainties of fallen views of gender) can be remade in the incarnate likeness of Christ” (2013, p. 55). For Coakley, then, gender is just a type of embodied difference rather than a rigid category to be *imposed* on particular bodies, and it matters for us not in itself “but only because God desires it to matter and can remake it in the image of his Son” (2013, p. 55).²⁹ However, as Christ is ascended to the right hand of the Father, it is primarily the Spirit who draws us unto this transformation.

The Holy Spirit is actually primary in Coakley’s doctrine of God as a whole, not just on this point. To some this might initially seem to place the trinitarian cart before the horse since the typical flow in theology proper is to treat first the topic of the Father, then the Son, and then the Spirit. And yet this she does due to an understanding that it is the *Spirit* who calls us up into fellowship with Jesus as the Son of God and then he who in turn acts as our one Mediator unto the fullness of relationality with the Father. So, this “‘incorporative,’ or ‘reflexive’” (2013, p. 111) view of the Trinity is one on which “the Holy Spirit is construed not simply as extending the revelation of Christ, nor even merely as enabling Christ’s recognition, but as actually catching up the created realm into the life of God (making it ‘conformed to the likeness of his Son,’ to use Paul’s memorable phrase from Romans 8:29)” (2013, pp. 111–112). So, that destabilizing of poles which she describes experiencing at the altar is effected through the power of the Spirit to present Christ to us rather than it being the case that “we can get our hands around ‘Jesus’ without prior pneumatological displacement” (2014, p. 592). Such is not to the detriment of the Son, which is just to say that it is not as though Christ *could not* be made present to us sans Spirit. Rather, as the immanent life of the Trinity is marked by perfectly self-giving love between its persons so too are the economic realities of the Trinity presented *via* mutuality rather than one person supervening over the others to invite us into fellowship with Divinity.

This, it seems to me, is the sort of thing Coakley is getting at in describing the need for a trinitarian perspective on gender. It is not to describe a sense of gender which can somehow be retrojected up out of our own weak, finite being into God’s eternal Being but a sense of the matter in which gender is construed through the displacement of fallen humanity’s assumptions in favor of God’s will for each of us. And so, when the Spirit draws us progressively into further and further conformity with Christ as the servant of the Father, not just here on earth but in the new creation as well, it is at some times a drawing away from normative assumptions about our various embodied roles and at others into a transformation of how we think of ourselves and others. This is the way in

which the fluid body which she describes finds its rest; not *via* the loss of anything which makes us who we are but in a reformation of our being which preserves who we were, are, and will be, through God's fidelity.

The Eschatological (Dis)Continuity Model of Disability

These various pieces laid out, we can now set to a constructive sketching of my model. Turning first to those issues for Yong's disability theology which seem to stem from his chosen definition of disability, let us simply reject his impairment-based notion in favor of what Barnes provides. Recall that she describes disability as consisting in the following two necessary conditions:

A person *S*, is disabled in a context, *C*, iff:

- i. *S* is in some state *x*
- ii. The rules for making judgements about solidarity employed by the disability rights movement classify *x* in a context *C* as among the conditions that they are seeking to promote justice for (2016, p. 46).³⁰

However, given the eschatological focus of this paper I offer a small amendment to (ii) which we can render as (ii)*

A person *S*, is disabled in a context, *C*, iff:

- i. *S* is in some state *x*
- ii. The rules for making judgements about solidarity employed by the disability rights movement classify *x* in a context *C* as among the conditions that they are seeking to promote justice for, *or would have so classified x's marks prior to the eschaton.*

The usage of "marks" in (ii)* is the same as Yong's usage of the term, which is to say it includes but is not limited to "phenotypical appearances, mental capacities, behavioral expressions, and verbal, emotional, and interpersonal traits, among other perceivable—whether visually or audibly—features that emerge from and express human identities across the lifespan" (2012, p. 5). The adoption of this modified Barnesian definition of disability will help us avoid the difficulties previously spotted in Yong's vision for disabled resurrection bodies.

In order to see how these benefits will be gained, first we must chart what exactly the Eschatological (Dis)Continuity Model of Disability—hereafter, just E(D)CM—actually consists in:

E(D)CM: Disability is a neutral-difference maker simpliciter and is included in God's acts of creation as a type of embodied diversity. Given the breadth of disabilities which exist among human persons and the various degrees to which a given individual's disability may or may not be valuable to them, disability *may* persist

eschatologically if it constitutes an identity-making property for them. An identity-making property is here understood as any non-sinful personal characteristic which, if lacked at a time t , causes a human person to doubt that they are the same individual they were prior to t . Resurrected disabled persons can maintain their disabilities if they are identity-making properties while also being progressively transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit.

On E(D)CM we keep all of the primary components of what is wanted in Yong's disability theology as it pertains to eschatology. Disabled persons can remain actually disabled as they are resurrected while it also being the case that they gain the sort of pneumatologically powerful bodies he describes. A reasonable question at this junction, however,³¹ is why identity in particular is emphasized in E(D)CM. For example, consider someone like the man Molly Haslam anonymizes in her monograph, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, as "Chan" (Haslam, 2012, particularly Ch. 3). At the time of writing Haslam describes Chan as "a twenty-year-old man with cerebral palsy" (p. 57) who is at the intellectual developmental level of an infant (p. 57). This includes the fact that Chan "does not possess the capacity to employ concepts of self and other required for intentional agency... Similarly, his behavior does not reflect an ability to express himself symbolically using gestures, words, or actions with the intent to give meaning to experience" (pp. 53–54). It seems like E(D)CM would require that Chan *must not* be disabled in the eschaton because he appears to have no personal identity of which there could be identity-making properties.

In articulating E(D)CM as I have above, I do not mean to make such a claim. Note that I claim "disability *may* persist eschatologically if it constitutes an identity-making property" and not that "disability *may* persist eschatologically if *and only if* it constitutes an identity-making property." The difference between these two claims is significant, for the former describes simply one case—perhaps among many—in which disability could persist eschatologically while the latter describes *the only case* in which disability could so persist. E(D)CM emphasizes identity because it is an extension and clarification of Yong's disability theology, and Yong therein places a significant focus on the idea of one's continuity of identity. But E(D)CM is not an exclusivist account of disability in the eschaton. That is to say, it merely articulates one way in which we might understand disability to not be absent eschatologically without claiming that this is the only way such a thing might occur. Perhaps, for instance, being disabled could be a component of what Stump (2022, Ch. 2) terms one's "true self."³²

The attainment of one's true self "is the condition of that person when he has what he most cares about in both an objective and a subjective sense and when his deepest heart's desires converge with his thriving" (p.

51). I have elsewhere (Davis, in press) deployed this concept of the true self in order to describe how disability might persist for at least some disabled persons eschatologically because it is a good for them even if it is not something like an identity-making property. In Chan's case it might be that, given his level of cognitive development, he does not have much in the way of subjective desires for a particular kind of body and/or mind in the way some other persons might. However, it could also be the case that God, who establishes that which is objectively good for us, knows that Chan's truest self is as Haslam knew him. If this were true then it would matter not that Chan does not have a cognizant self-identity, for God would know what he needs to flourish most fully. The same would go for persons who have experienced traumatic brain injuries, dementia, or other phenomena which impact their self-understanding. Likewise, those who do not conceptualize their disability as a contributor to their personal identity but who, nevertheless, value who they are as disabled people³³ would be similarly accounted for on such a view. And this view can stand alongside E(D)CM as a complementary way of thinking about disability in the eschaton rather than a competitor with it.

Now, let us recall the two issues which Yong's view previously faced: that his sense of continuity/discontinuity risked slipping from tension into incoherence, and that disabled persons looked like they might not actually count as disabled anymore in the eschaton. The first of these two difficulties had to do with Yong's unclarity about what a powerfully resurrected disabled body could look like in light of his impairment-based definition of disability. E(D)CM rectifies this problem through its usage of a different definition of disability, and we can see how this is the case when we draw in what was gleaned from Coakley previously. Considering continuity first, if an individual's disability constitutes an identity-making property for them then they simply keep whatever marks are necessary for them to be recognizable to themselves as their disabled self. However, they can also have a body which is different in the sorts of respects Yong describes without losing said continuity because of the value-neutrality of E(D)CM's definition of disability. After all, if disability is not defined by being infirm, weak, and so forth then there seems to be little trouble in saying that a resurrected body could be both manifestly disabled and yet capable of things we would presently think unimaginable. Loosed from the shackles of an understanding of disability which requires impairment as its primary marker, we can imagine various scenarios of resurrected disability of this sort.

What of Coakley, then? Recall that in her reflections on gender she honed in on the liminality of the category; the way in which gender is an embodied difference given to us by God. This language is not desperately dissimilar (despite its highly different context!) to what Barnes means

when she writes that “being disabled is simply something that makes you a minority—it is a way of having a *minority* body” (2016, p. 78). For Coakley, reading through Gregory Nyssen, the aforementioned eschatological horizon which constitutes our *telos* is not only a place where our bodies find a kind of rest but also that “which will give mortal flesh final significance” (2002, 166). Similarly to the way in which the manifestation of our end *via* the Spirit on this mortal coil disrupts categories like gender roles, so too will the Spirit undermine our assumptions about disability and disabled persons through the resurrection. Disability can presently connote lack,³⁴ particularly in light of ableist conceptions of the term on which it must be a kind of bad-difference divergence from the norm, but it need not do so forever. We can keep the bodies God has given to us while they are also renewed because God has the ability to beat the boundaries between what we *assume* must be the case and what God alone knows *is* our greatest path to fulfillment.³⁵ Just as Coakley urges us to not expect a merely genderless resurrection neither should we expect one in which there is a mere homogenization of bodies either.³⁶

To take a specific example, consider the hypothetical case of a pre-eschaton non-verbal autistic child. For this child, their autism and its non-verbal quality *may* constitute an identity-making property which, given that it is not sinful, we have no more reason to suppose God ought to remove than to suppose God ought to make everyone a particular gender, race, or some other sort of person. Note that I am not here attempting to analogize race or gender with disability. Rather, I am suggesting that race, gender, and disability are similarly classed things (i.e., things that can contribute to one’s identity) even while they are quite disanalogous.³⁷ So, continuing on, unless we have a good reason to suppose that autism is a counterfactually stable global bad-difference maker there is not a reason why it could not persist in the eschaton sans any local bad-difference makers (e.g., the suffering which can come from ongoingly overstimulating environments) because neither of those things define autism as a disability. Moreover,³⁸ the Spirit could reverse our expectations regarding the ability of non-verbal autistic children to be understood by perhaps endowing this child with non-verbal communicative faculties which transcend what is presently possible, by reforming the abilities of non-autistic persons to understand their autistic siblings in Christ, or *via* some mixture of the two or by some other means altogether. With disability understood as just a way of being a particular type of embodied person in a value-neutral sense, the seeming bads of the child’s autism can fall away similarly to how Coakley supposes God will eliminate the harmful features of present masculinity and femininity while leaving our gendered bodies intact, thereby allowing the child to simply *be* autistic freely.

Regarding the second difficulty, it seems clear that E(D)CM can accommodate a sense of continuity and discontinuity for disabled persons which permits that they might truly remain disabled. This is the particular motive of (ii)*'s amendment to (ii). All that a disabled person would need in order to count as disabled eschatologically is that they retain the marks of their disability which make it an identity-making property for them and that said marks *would have* been classified by the disability rights movement as a disability pre-eschaton. It does not matter if the ongoing changes which occur through the Spirit would mean that the present disability rights movement might not consider a given person to be disabled anymore. Before we begin thinking that this seems like the problem of just slowly eliminating disability all over again, allow me to clarify. I am not saying that at some point one's marks of disability would simply be gone or entirely unrecognizable,³⁹ but just that the present disability rights movement might eventually look at the whole of a resurrected disabled person's lived experiences in the eschaton and think that they are not really disabled anymore.

To offer an analogy which might help illuminate what is meant here, consider the fact that I am a wearer of eyeglasses due to my being near-sighted. Being near-sighted in such a way that said near-sightedness can be eliminated through the use of eyeglasses is generally not considered to be a disability by the disability rights movement because it does not bring with it the kind of difficulties and resultant solidarity that, say, extreme myopia which is uncorrectable might. Put differently, near-sightedness that can be corrected to 20/20 vision with eyeglasses typically does not bring a person into the sort of communal space(s) which the disability rights movement is concerned with. However, in the eschaton presumably neither myself nor a person with extreme myopia will suffer from our present embodied states as people with less-than-20/20 vision, but this could be for differing reasons. Insofar as I can tell, my near-sightedness is not an identity-making property for me and so perhaps I will simply not be near-sighted in the eschaton, and the same could be said for the extreme myopic if their disability is not an identity-making property either. But, if it is then it could be the case that the eyes of their resurrection body are still extremely myopic and that they, like the previously hypothesized autistic child, experience other intrinsic or extrinsic changes which remove any bad-difference impacts they experienced during their pre-eschaton myopia. Given they no longer take part in the same sort of communities of solidarity which marked them out as disabled pre-eschaton, the present disability rights community might well no longer consider them to be disabled. And yet, the fact that they are still extremely myopic means that they *would have* otherwise obviously been disabled. So, in the sense with which I am concerned to propose

disability can be persistent in resurrected bodies here, they do remain disabled by definition.

At the heart of disability theology lies a concern for the recognition of all persons—regardless of disability or lack thereof—as equal heirs of not just mere dignity but of the hope and justice which is promised to all humanity through Scripture. In her influential contribution to this field, *Disability and Christian Theology*, Deborah Beth Creamer argues that we “must consider the implications of diverse human experiences of embodiment in our theological reflections and religious practices” (2009, p. 117). But Creamer also notes that, even within a diversity of perspectives, each viewpoint can only bring so much to the table (2009, p. 116). As such, a variety of voices need to be heard which attempt to uplift hope and justice for disabled persons so that their kaleidoscopic view might refract God’s light through to us despite the inability of any one approach to do the whole job itself. For this reason, I have here offered E(D)CM as a synthetic approach to disability’s eschatological retention, extending Yong’s work on the topic while, simultaneously, addressing some issues which it would face on its own.

Conclusion

Though others have since offered significant reflections on this topic, Yong’s work on the possibility of disability remaining within God’s eschatological renewal of creation is still an important contribution within the broader milieu of disability theology. Yet, despite this fact, there are some conceptual difficulties present in Yong’s work here which have remained unaddressed over time. Therefore, in this paper I offered a clarificatory extension of Yong’s disability theology vis-à-vis eschatology which, while remaining true to the character of the original works from which it draws, provides modifications sufficient to face two key problems otherwise faced. In so doing, I first provided a critical overview of Yong’s eschatology in order to highlight said problems: one, that his sense of continuity/discontinuity risked slipping from tension into incoherence and, two, that disabled persons looked like they might not actually count as disabled anymore in the eschaton. I then suggested that these issues for Yong’s eschatology could be traced to the definition of disability he uses, proposing that we swap this definition out with the one used by Barnes in her crafting of the value-neutral model of disability.

I next turned to Coakley’s writings on the way(s) God’s divine interruptions *via* the Holy Spirit can disrupt malformed views of what it means for us to be God’s creatures. Therein, Coakley particularly addresses the concept of gender and God’s use of this liminal feature of human identity to tear down distinctions we impose upon one another on its basis. This

picture of pneumatologically motivated shifts within our assumptions of what our embodied experiences mean for us was then used to prompt rethinking Yong's disability eschatology in my construction of the Eschatological (Dis)Continuity Model of Disability. By piecing together a slightly altered version of Barnes's definition of disability with Yong's theological treatment of disability in the eschaton and then viewing the composite through the lens offered by Coakley, E(D)CM offers one way that we can understand disability's potential eschatological persistence. Particularly, disability might persist for at least some disabled persons if their disability constitutes what I have here termed an identity-making property. This is not the only reason disability could so persist but is an articulation of that possibility which coheres with Yong's broader theological concerns. Another way to think of the matter would be to say that I have here undertaken a kind of faith seeking understanding exercise; I have attempted, on the one hand, to maintain a sense of reverent openness toward what should be expected in God's new creation while, on the other hand, offering a live option for how we might think about the matter.

Notes

1. Yong is, of course, not alone in considering disability vis-à-vis eschatology. This piece focuses particularly on his work in this area, but there are other—and, particularly, more recent—authors whose work is also well worth considering. To name just a few examples to which the interested should look, see: Brock (2019, Ch. 8), Efirid (2020), Timpe (2020), and Powell (2023, Ch. 5). See also the overview offered in: Yancey (2021, pp. 376–377).
2. This definition he takes from the World Health Organization.
3. The term “identity” can take a variety of meanings. Here I mean to refer to something like what Christine Korsgaard calls the “practical identity” of a person (as opposed to their “theoretical identity”). David Efirid summarizes Korsgaard in writing that “theoretical identity consists in a metaphysical description of who you are, whereas practical identity consists in a description under which you value yourself.” This point will be discussed further when the Eschatological (Dis)Continuity Model of Disability is laid out, but this clarificatory note is worth making here as well. For Efirid's summary, see: Efirid (2020, p. 222). For Korsgaard's original description, see: Korsgaard (1996, p. 101).
4. And systematic theology more generally, a point Oliver Crisp makes well (Crisp, 2019, pp. 89–95).
5. This paper's proposal of E(D)CM builds on my work to synthesize Yong and Barnes's treatments of disability elsewhere. See: Davis (in press). These two pieces could be understood as a kind of duology; they attempt to give reasons to think that disability might persist eschatologically from two somewhat different vantage points.
6. Do not at all understand this point to mean that practical theology *does not* have a place for careful conceptual work as well! I mean nothing of the sort. Instead, I am simply highlighting that Yong, in positioning his disability theology firmly as a systematic exercise, has a *particularly clear* place for such considerations given that

he is not also attempting to work out the practicalities of what he offers in *Theology and Down Syndrome* (2007). However, this perspective does gain additional consideration in his later volume *The Bible, Disability, and the Church* (2011).

7. For example, Ch. 2–9 of *Theology and Down Syndrome* (2007) all begin with various quotes from disabled persons and those close to them which are used to focus the discussions that follow respectively.
8. See also (2011, pp. 120–121) and (2012, pp. 5–6).
9. To take an analogy, consider those from the *Star Trek* universe who are wary of transporter (i.e., teleportation) technology because they are unsure that it will really be *them* who is beamed from one place to another and not someone who is just a perfect copy of them. Yong wants to be sure that it is numerically the same person on both ends in the same way a Transporter Chief might as well!
10. In fact, Yong mentions that Mark needed precisely this sort of procedure in order to address a double heart murmur (2007, p. 3).
11. See also her earlier work on this topic (Barnes 2009).
12. For example, Usain Bolt's sprinting ability results from statistically atypical aspects of his body, but this is an abnormality which increases his capacity to run rather than diminishing it. As such, a normal function view will not generally regard his statistically atypical body in the same way as, say, a paraplegic's body.
13. It is important to point out here that Barnes articulates no clear value theory or philosophy of well-being in *The Minority Body* (2016). Though she gives some general descriptions—for example, “ Φ is bad for x just in case Φ has a negative effect on x 's well-being—(p. 80) she also states the following: “I'm not attempting to make any substantial claims in value theory. I'm simply stipulating how I'm going to be using the phrases ‘good for’ and ‘bad for’ in this particular context.” (p. 80) However, it might be that one wonders if there are not theories of human well-being which would undercut the sort of argument she is running. For example, an objective list theory of human well-being which specifies that bodily perfection is of a sort which excludes disability would be such a theory. If one has this concern, my brief suggestion is that they might take on William Lauinger's desire-perfectionism theory of well-being (2012, Ch. 4) for present purposes given that it seems amenable to the rest of Barnes's model (e.g., Lauinger, 2012, pp. 101–105). I do not think Barnes's work or my efforts here strictly require one commit to a specific theory like Lauinger's in order to accomplish what they intend given their respective scopes. But if one needs such a thing in mind so as to proceed with our arguments then this one might do for now. See also Lauinger (2013) and Lauinger (2021).
14. Though she notes that this is a very general sketch of the two in comparison. She writes that “there are many, quite disparate theories of well-being. And there's no clear way of characterizing the mere-difference/bad difference distinction that cuts across all these different accounts of well-being—or at least, if there is one, I haven't been able to come up with it.” As such, take this distinction as something serviceable enough to get the job done here rather than an exhaustive definition of each camp's fuller views (Barnes, 2016, p. 60). See also note 13.
15. Of course, some views of human teleology might suggest this kind of condition is bad in other ways. For example, proper function views of human nature might say CF is an example of natural evil. For an intriguing suggestion of how such views might be able to be made compatible with the eschatological retention of disability, see: Colgrove (2020).
16. Shorthand for “if and only if.”
17. Or, perhaps, at least *vicious* circularity depending on how we want to approach the

- issue. C.f., Sosa (2009, Ch. 9–10).
18. Emphasis in original. C.f., Schalk (2022).
 19. Alternatively, one might wish to consider some of the epistemological possibilities addressed in this piece which are not present here: Weisberg (2012, pp. 599–604).
 20. Emphasis in original.
 21. It is worth noting here that she specifically means “disability” in a technical sense, not an ordinary language sense (which is much more pliable). See: (2016, p. 48 n.68).
 22. Yong actually engages with Coakley (2007b, p. 281) a bit but the interconnectivity I intend here is of a slightly different stripe and of greater depth than his fairly brief conversation with her.
 23. Emphasis in original.
 24. Brown (1988, p. 294) also comments in his magisterial *The Body and Society* that “sexuality was designed for marriage and childbirth: it enabled mankind to continue its forlorn attempt to stem the tide of death by producing progeny. This had not been intended in God’s first creation of the prototype of human nature. Adam’s physical body had been unimaginably different from our own.”
 25. E.g., Gregory’s claim that “the one who is called ‘son’ in Proverbs is here called ‘bride,’ and Wisdom correspondingly, is transferred into the role of the bridegroom. That is to assure that the human person, once separated from the bridegroom, might be betrothed to God as a holy virgin” (Gregory of Nyssa, 1978, p. I).
 26. A point made particularly forcefully in: (2011, particularly pp. 24–30), (2002, Ch. 1), and (2013, Ch. 6).
 27. C.f., Ward (2007). See also Powell’s discussion of this piece in: Powell (2023, pp. 87–91).
 28. These observations are taken from throughout Erin Dufault-Hunter’s essay “Sex is Really about God.” See: Dufault-Hunter (2020, pp. 215–233).
 29. Though the comment “in the image of the Son” should not be taken to imply a kind of “ultimate masculinity” for human existence! Rather, it is just the case that in Jesus we see particularly potent subversions of gendered roles such that “Sonship” takes on a new meaning altogether.
 30. Though, here I have removed the modifiers “physical” and “bodily” in (i) given that we are expanding the scope of this definition as previously stated.
 31. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for pressing for better clarity on this point.
 32. A somewhat revised articulation of this view is forthcoming in: Hill and Davis (in press).
 33. For a helpful discussion of one example, see Sami Schalk’s (2022) treatment of how disabled Black Americans tend to differently narrate their experiences of disability from white Americans.
 34. Lisa Powell has recently offered helpful reflections on the idea that—even if disability connotes some sort of “lack” inasmuch as a given disabled person might need to be receptive of various forms of care for which non-disabled persons do not depend on others—“receptivity” should not be taken to necessitate “powerlessness” (2023, Ch. 4). C.f., McKirland (2022, particularly Ch. 1–2) and Creamer (2009, Ch. 5).
 35. C.f., again Stump on “true selves” (2022, Ch 2.).
 36. Something Candida Moss refers to more boldly as a kind of “heavenly eugenics” (Moss, 2019, p. 26). See also Moss (2011).
 37. Additionally, it is possible that one could deny that anyone can properly articulate a unified concept of disability at all (e.g., Timpe 2020). However, to do so here

would seem to constitute a more significant departure from Yong's original work than is wanted at present, and so this possibility is not pursued here.

38. Keep in mind that this example is nothing more than that: an example of some possibilities which seem to be live options for thinking about how disability could persist eschatologically. I am decidedly not suggesting that this *is* what would happen in the case of this hypothetical child or delimiting the range of possibilities which God might actualize in the hereafter. For example, it could be the case instead that there is a kind of “radical discontinuity” between pre- and post-resurrection bodies which Powell has recently described (2023, Ch. 5, particularly pp. 130–132). But, given that Yong's account posits a somewhat closer relation between said bodies than this, what I have offered here is not quite so radical a view.
39. C.f., Powell (2023, Ch. 5).

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