The Word Became Disabled:
The Possibilities and Challenges in Systematic Christology for Affirming Disability

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis has not been submitted as an exercise for a degree at this or any other university and it is entirely my own work. I confirm that the work has been completed in full compliance with relevant university policies, including the Academic Integrity policy, the Trinity Policy on Good Research Practice, and the guidance on AI and GenAI in Teaching, Learning, Assessment and Research.

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Summary

The purpose of this dissertation is to develop a systematic disability Christology. It asks what disability reveals about Christ's humanity and its relationship with divinity. The aim is not to diagnose Christ, but to use disability as a lens to affirm Christ's vulnerability and limits. How Christ relates to vulnerability is crucial for the norms it creates for humanity and disability. Disability functions not only as a critique but also as a source of constructive insights and alternative imagery for Christology. The main interlocutors of this thesis are Thomas Aquinas and Jürgen Moltmann, whose contrasting approaches to suffering, vulnerability, and Christology reveal different possibilities and limitations for disability Christology. The thesis makes three central claims: that Christ's human nature must have sufficient limits to reflect the reality of his humanity; that Christ must not be related to disability through suffering alone; and that there is a need to retain the Chalcedonian distinction between Christ's natures to prevent a curative relationship between the two. The thesis does not rely on a single definition of disability, thereby ensuring space for both the challenging and affirming dimensions of disabled experience.

The thesis proceeds by examining the theological anthropologies of Aquinas and Moltmann to establish how disability is situated within their theologies. It then analyses their Christologies, focusing on physicality and intellect, and how Christ can be understood as vulnerable. Attention turns to their interpretations of the cross, which is a complex area for disability Christology because it risks reinforcing narratives that equate disability with suffering. This thesis argues that a counternarrative is required, one that does not undermine Christ's suffering on the cross but shamelessly promotes the dignity of humanity now. Finally, it examines the relationship between God and humanity and Christ's two natures as they parallel each other and argues that a non-competitive approach retains the integrity and giftedness of human nature and avoids a curative logic. Using the image of a mobility aid, it argues that divine aid is possible without being a corrective. As a result, this work emphasises that disability should be primarily related to Christ's humanity, affirming that God became a vulnerable human, and that this is good.

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Table of Contents

Declaration i
Summary ii
Acknowledgments iii
Table of Contents v
List of Abbreviations vii
Introduction 1
Chapter One 13
Introduction 13
1.1. The Hermeneutical Challenge of Defining Disability 13
1.1.1. Disability as a Medical Abnormality and Deficiency 13
1.1.2. Disability as a Social Phenomenon 17
1.1.3. Approaching Disability Going Forward 21
1.2. Literature Review 24
1.2.1. The Problems with How Disabled People Have Been Understood Theologically 24
1.2.2. Disability as Vulnerability and Limits 28
1.2.3. Christ as a Vulnerable and Disabled Figure 31
1.2.4. The Cross as a Disabling Event 38
1.3. The Potential Contributions of Aquinas and Moltmann for Disability Christology 41
Conclusion 45
Chapter Two 48
Introduction 48
2.1. Thomas Aquinas and an Anthropology of Comparison 49
2.1.1. Hylomorphism and the Status of Disability 49
2.1.2. The Body's Relationship with Cognitive Abilities 56
2.1.3. The Possibility of Prelapsarian Disabilities 61
2.2. Jürgen Moltmann and an Anthropology of Becoming 64
2.2.1. Being a Body 64
2.2.2. Eschatological Anthropology 67
2.2.3. Questioning Ideas of Health and Disability 73
Conclusion 77
Chapter Three 80
Introduction 80
3.1. The Physical Vulnerability of Christ 82
3.1.1. Aquinas and the Physical Defects of Christ 82
3.1.2. Moltmann and the Relational and Transient Flesh of Christ 91
3.2. The Knowledge of Christ and Intellectual Disabilities 101

3.2.1. Aquinas and the Intellectual Perfection of Christ 101
3.2.2. Moltmann and Christ's Dependency on Others 113
Conclusion 123
Chapter Four 128
Introduction 128
4.1. A Disability of Absence 131
4.1.1. Disabling Relationships 131
4.1.2. Reconsidering the Harshness of the Cross 142
4.2. Remixing the Mixed State of the Cross 148
4.2.1. Suffering and Joy on the Cross 148
4.2.2. The Shamelessness of the Cross and the Pride of Adam 158
4.2.3. Rejecting the Compulsory Able-Bodiedness of Risen Bodies 169
Conclusion 172
Chapter Five 178
Introduction 178
5.1. Divine Power as Divine Gift-Giving 182
5.2. A Non-Curative Divine Nature 209
5.3. Disability, Divinity, and the Issue of Language 223
Conclusion 228
Conclusion 233
Bibliography 243

List of Abbreviations

CT	Compendium Theologiae
QdAn	Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima
SCG	Summa Contra Gentiles
ST	Summa Theologiae

Introduction

According to the World Health Organisation, it is estimated that 1.3 billion or one in six people are disabled, which means that there is a high chance that if one is not disabled that there are likely disabled people in one's life.[1] The disabled community is understood to be the largest minority group and yet there is a lack of agreement about how to define disability. This is partly because disability includes a wide variety of conditions; therefore, a Deaf person, a person with Down syndrome, and a person with multiple sclerosis all have very different experiences. But it is not simply the particularities of people's disability that leads to the variety of responses, rather it also depends on which experiences of disability one pays attention to. If one concentrates on pain, what a person cannot do, their lack of independence, and how they compare to a perceived norm means that it becomes easy to view disability as tragic, because quality of life is then assumed to be inferior. The problem with this perspective is not that disability involves pain and suffering, but rather it is that disability is reduced to these experiences and therefore, it makes disability something to be feared, pitied, and avoided. The perception of what a normal person can do and looks like means that functional and aesthetic norms often inform how disability is understood; it is different, lacking, ugly, and abnormal. This view is influenced by a variety of phenomena, and theology has had a role in this negative view. Indeed, disability has been seen as a sign of the Fall, or viewed through the lens of theodicy, suggesting that something has gone wrong. Disability is not conceived as part of God's plan for creation and, therefore, it is unsurprising that people with disabilities are often viewed as needing to be cured of their disabilities.

Disability has often been treated theologically as an afterthought. It is only in the last thirty years, that disability has begun to be used as a hermeneutic to show the implicit ableism in theologies and to construct theologies that approach disability with more nuance and experience. Within these treatments, disability has been seen as primarily a topic for bioethics and practical theology, rather than a topic for systematic theology. The premise of this dissertation is that disability needs to be understood as a key resource for systematic theology. The importance of disability is not simply because it is a marginalised identity and experience, but because disability points to the status of creation. While there is no one way to be disabled, disabled people are often more aware of their limits and the precarious nature of one's body and

[1] Cf. 'Disability', *World Health Organization*, 3 July 2023, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/disability-and-health.

this is why disability points to the reality of being human and part of creation. To be human means being vulnerable, having limits, and being dependent on others. While disability is treated as being other, the reality is that these qualities of being human are not unique to disability. The desire for compulsory able-bodiedness means that these qualities are not given prominence in society; rather, values such as independence, efficiency, strength, and predictability are privileged. Disabled people are less likely to attempt to ignore their limits, they cannot believe the idea that they are in complete control of their lives. In this way, disability makes clear one of the central ideas in theology which is that creation has limits and is completely dependent on God.

The title of this work is *The Word Became Disabled* because its focus is on putting forward a disability Christology and at first glance, one might view the idea that disability reveals how creation is understood as being a separate topic to Christology. However, the incarnation is pivotal for understanding the status of creation because in becoming human, Christ is taking on a precarious nature. In this sense, the incarnation can be understood as becoming disabled, not by appealing to a particular disability, but in terms of becoming part of humanity which is dependent and vulnerable. Disability as a lens can make clear the reality of Christ's humanity and can be used to unmask the norms that arise from Christ's humanity. Christ reveals what it means to be human; therefore, the constant question is whether the particularities of Christ will prevent certain groups of people from being able to live up to the idea of humanity put forward by Christ.

There is an inbuilt challenge for Christology, which is that a particular person is understood to have universal consequences. While Christ must exist as a particular person, the challenge lies in how particular aspects of Christ, such as his gender, are interpreted and universalised. One of the biggest challenges for developing a disability Christology in particular is whether Christ's intellect and physicality promotes the expectation that one is able-bodied. The idea of compulsory able-bodiedness is the view that it would always be better that one is not disabled, to be normal.[2] The problem of able-bodiedness intersects with many theological subjects, from the creation of the world to the eschaton, and many of these issues all come together in the person of Christ. A disability hermeneutic helps to question the norms that arise and to ensure that the contingency of Christ's humanity is taken seriously. There is a temptation

[2] Cf. Robert McRuer, 'Compulsory Able-Bodiedness and Queer/Disabled Existence', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Fifth, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2016), 618–19.

to presume that Christ conforms to what is perceived as normal or what is idealised which is a high level of control over one's life rather than allow Christ to be a real part of creation.

The aim of this thesis is to develop a disability Christology. While disability theologians have written about Christ from a disability hermeneutic, no one has used the term disability Christology, the way that others have combined their hermeneutical lens with Christology, leading to feminist, womanist, Black, and queer Christologies. Throughout this work, I will use the term disability Christology, but it must be noted that it is a term that is in the process of being constructed. This work offers one possible approach to disability Christology, but there are other disability Christologies. At its heart, disability Christology is about re-envisioning Christology in such a way that it is conscious of the experiences of disabled people. It questions the values that have historically dominated Christology, for example, strength and self-sufficiency, using a disability hermeneutic. Daniel Rempel argues that "the ultimate takeaway" that disability theology offers Christology is that it "demands that we take seriously the particular condition of our corporeal existence, amidst the struggles of our own bodies."[3] Therefore, there is a need not only to take seriously that Christ became human, but also to recognise that his humanity was vulnerable and limited. I would argue that this is the central claim of disability Christology.

This thesis does not focus simply on Christ's humanity because relating disability to Christ, one cannot limit this study to Christ's humanity. Even if one does not view Christ as being impacted by his divinity, there is still a relationship being articulated, one that focuses on absence or lack. A disability hermeneutic helps to provide insights and questions. For example, if one considers Christ's humanity as vulnerable and therefore, in a sense disabled, there is the question of whether Christ's divinity has a curative dimension because the divinity could make up for what he is unable to do as a human. Alternatively, kenosis, the self-emptying of Christ, could be understood as a kind of disability, and if so, what kind of model of disability is being used? Different understandings of disability will impact what connections can be made and what they reveal. If kenosis is understood as putting aside divine attributes, even if it is only temporarily, it implies that disability is about the creation of a lack. Disability theologians, such as Lisa Powell, do not follow this model of kenosis but relate disability to Christ's divinity and the rest of the Trinity by arguing that in his election God has made himself dependent on

[3] David Rempel, 'Wounded for Us: Disability Theology's Contribution to Christology', *Journal of Disability and Religion* 29, no. 3 (2025): 329.

creation.[4] There is a need to examine how to articulate the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity that takes seriously the contingent nature that Christ adopts. As a result, the overarching question of this thesis is what does disability reveal about Christ's humanity and divinity, and their relationship with each other?

This overarching question is one that could be approached in many ways and therefore, it is necessary to explain why, in what follows, I approach it using the Christologies of Jürgen Moltmann and Thomas Aquinas. These two theologians are notable in the Christian tradition for the central and extended attention that their theologies give to human suffering. I examine both of them to ask whether and how their very different approaches can contribute to the construction of a specific disability Christology.

To begin addressing how divinity relates to human vulnerability in the chapters that follow, I will examine Moltmann's Christology. Moltmann understands vulnerability as not confined to Christ's humanity but also extends to the life of the Trinity. Because he emphasises the oneness of Christ, what is revealed in the life of Christ, including suffering, is true of the Son. Moltmann's social Christology has potential for disability Christology because he not only locates Christ with marginalised people but understands that he grew in his knowledge of his messiahship from his relationships. This interdependence is not limited to his humanity, Moltmann also argues that God is impacted by creation and therefore, God is formed through his relationship with others. This approach has potential for disability Christology because it rejects self-sufficiency and stresses that vulnerability is to be accepted.

At the same time, while Moltmann has many aspects that are appealing for a disability Christology, there are significant challenges that will need to be addressed. Moltmann's relational approach may miss some of the insights of a Chalcedonian approach because one loses the distinctions between the two natures and the potential challenge is that there is an implicit making of space for each nature to penetrate each other. I will need to examine this aspect of the relational approach because there needs to be a respect for each nature. There is a risk of a curative logic where each nature needs the other to make up for the deficit. A further difficulty arises from his emphasis on suffering in his interpretation of the cross. While this can create solidarity between God and the victims of suffering, Moltmann's view that Christ was

[4] Cf. Lisa Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited: Trinity, Christology, and Liberation* (T & T Clark, 2023), 44.

abandoned by the Father will be considered from a disability perspective. One of the challenges for connecting disability to suffering on the cross is that one needs to be honest that disability involves suffering, while also ensuring that disability is not reduced to suffering. The question that arises is whether Moltmann gives a sufficient counternarrative to the extreme suffering that Christ experiences on the cross.

I will also examine Aquinas's Christology, which follows the Chalcedonian distinction between Christ's two natures, because it has the potential to emphasise the integrity of human nature. Aquinas's understanding of kenosis focuses on the addition of a human nature rather than the loss of any aspect of his divine nature, and I will consider how this perspective might be beneficial for a disability Christology. Using a disability hermeneutic, I will explore how this framework enables an understanding of the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity so that it does not require any suggestion of a loss or penetration between the two. This approach could allow Christ's human nature to be respected in the person of Christ. I will also consider how it, together with other aspects of his theological cosmology, such as the non-competitive relationship between creation and God, contributes to a theology that affirms difference and limitation. I will draw on these features of Aquinas's theology as potential resources for building an understanding of human nature that respects the limits of human nature without viewing them as simply defects. In developing a disability Christology, it is necessary that human limits are allowed to exist without instinctively seeking to fix or cure them. Furthermore, the distinction between Christ's human and divine nature helps to avoid essentialising what is done to Christ and put forth a counternarrative that affirms one's dignity even when it is not immediately apparent. From the perspective of disability, it can make clear that injustices that one experiences are not a defining part of an individual.

However, there are several challenges in Aquinas's Christology that I will need to address. Firstly, there is the approach Aquinas takes to Original Sin and its impact on human nature. Aquinas believes that Christ has taken on some of the physical defects that come with a human nature that is not subject to grace. While these defects could be interpreted as a kind of disability, I will consider the continual difficulty of viewing these defects through the lens of sin that would impact this interpretation. Another issue that I will examine is Aquinas's claim that Christ possessed perfect knowledge, which raises the question of whether Christ has anything in common with the rest of humanity, let alone those who have intellectual disabilities. The perfect knowledge is further complicated when it comes to the cross, because while Christ is

understood to suffer, he possesses beatific vision which risks making Christ a supercrip, someone who can overcome their disability and their limits rather than inhabiting them.

When viewing Christ from a disability perspective, a natural question arises which is what kind of disabilities are being considered. Disability is a term that encompasses a wide variety of experiences and therefore, it cannot be treated as a single phenomenon. One approach to this challenge is to concentrate on specific disabilities, such as autism or Deafness, and to use those experiences to critically engage with theological concepts. This approach helps to avoid the suggestion that there is one way to be disabled. I am autistic and I have several other disabilities, and therefore, one might expect that I would want to present an autistic or neurodivergent approach to Christology. However, there are several reasons for why I intend to use a broader understanding of disability. Firstly, I began thinking about this project after completing a thesis on theodicy and I saw disability as a way to challenge theological narratives and responses to suffering. It meant that some of my initial questions were centred on questioning the impulse to use disability to question the goodness of God. Therefore, my entry point into this research was not through my experiences of being disabled. Secondly, I knew that this study would be a Christological work and the focus of this work was not on diagnosing Christ with a particular disability. While there are parallels that one could make, I do not view disability Christology as being fundamentally about making a historical claim about the physical and mental composition of Christ. There is not enough data to make a definitive statement. Since Christ is understood to stand with the oppressed and to be fully human, I argue that there is a need to question whether one's Christologies support compulsory able-bodiedness. If they do, it means that the Christology is in tension with the people that Christ identified with. While I could use a singular disability, I am interested in the different normative values that are contained in Christologies and the extent to which there is a push within them towards compulsory able-bodiedness.

At the same time, I will draw attention to particular disabilities or types of disabilities throughout this study. One of the aspects of Christ that people have argued for is that the incarnation points to human vulnerability and limits, but the focus has tended to be on the physicality of Christ rather than his intellect. In attributing disability to Christ, it means that one is confronted with one's own biases, and this is particularly the case with intellectual disabilities, where one might be faced with realising that one puts it in a different category to physical disabilities. Intellectual disabilities can appear more challenging to accept because of how much agency and intellectual abilities are valued in society, and for Christ in particular,

one might argue that he must be normal, if not exceptional, because otherwise one risks making Christ a madman, not the Son of God.[5] Christ has to mean what he says and therefore, there is a need to maintain that he had a good grasp of himself, but at the same time, there is a need to question the ways in which people with intellectual disabilities are seen. There is the view that people with severe cognitive disabilities are seen as lacking personhood and agency, and this needs to be challenged.

There is also a question of how to understand the norms that emerge from Christ's intellect and what this suggests about people with intellectual disabilities. While I aim to maintain a wide scope of disabilities in order to analyse Christ, I will not be addressing mental illness, such as depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorder. The passion and the cross, which I will be examining, clearly offer points of connection for interaction between mental illnesses and Christ; however, I see mental illness as being better served by a theology which makes mental health the central focus. There are elements of this study which would overlap with such a theology, particularly, the critique of the expectation to normalise people and make them productive, and I hope this study will have relevance for such a work. Nonetheless, to answer the questions that mental illnesses raise would require explorations of conscience, self-awareness, and dread which goes beyond the focus of this work.

Before moving onto the aims of this work, it is necessary to address the debate over how to refer people with disabilities. There has been a lot of discussion about whether it is better to use person-first language, a person with a disability, or identity-first language, a disabled person. The People First movement in the 1970s wanted to make clear that people with disabilities are not to be reduced to their impairments and are first and foremost a person and therefore, person-first language became the norm.[6] The importance of putting person-first was to show that disability does not dominate one's understanding of the human person. Having a disability can mean that other people do not see past one's disability, and it can result in others infantilising or stereotyping the person with a disability. The person-first approach is intended to affirm their personhood and individuality. It puts their personhood before their disability.[7]

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[5] C. S. Lewis famously argues that one is faced with a trilemma of deciding whether Jesus Christ is a lunatic, a fraud, or who he said he was, the Son of God. Cf. C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (Macmillian, 1952), 40–41.

[6] Cf. Amy F. Crocker and Susan N. Smith, 'Person-First Language: Are We Practicing What We Preach?', *Journal of Multidisciplinary Healthcare* 12 (2019): 126.

[7] Cf. D. S. Dunn and E. E. Andrews, 'Person-First and Identity-First Language: Developing Psychologists' Cultural Competence Using Disability Language', *American Psychologist* 70, no. 3 (2015): 258.

But disability communities have pushed back against person-first language, because it has been argued that to look past their disability is understood to look past the person. Jim Sinclair, who is autistic, has criticised the person-first approach because it is encouraging an approach that attempts to separate how his brain works from his personhood. It is argued that the person-first approach does not recognise that disability is an important part of the individual.[8] It has even been argued that to insist on person-first language means that there is a need to put one's disability to the side to be seen as person. It could exacerbate ableism, by continuing to see disability as something separate from personhood.[9] Identity-first language means that there is an acceptance of one's identity and even a kind of pride, despite the negative connotations. It emphasises that there are a variety of ways to be human.[10]

To speak momentarily as an autistic person, I tend to prefer identity-first language. Like Sinclair, I feel that the acceptance of who I am must involve the recognition that I am autistic. I did not know that I was autistic until I was in my twenties and therefore, my understanding of who I was did not include autism prior to my diagnosis. But the reality was even before I knew, autism impacted my experience of the world. The change was not that I became autistic, but that I was given the language to understand. While I feel that my autism is an integral part of who I am, I recognise that not everyone will feel their disability is as all-encompassing. There are those who have reason to feel that it is only a part of who they are. Furthermore, the reason that person-first language was viewed as a way to avoid disabilities defining a person is different to how a disability like autism can be seen to define a person. The former is concerned more with the perceptions of others than with disability itself and how some people might look at a person with a disability and only see what they cannot do, how it impacts their life, and fail to recognise that they are a complex person. At the same time, the rejection of identity-first language can make disability seem shameful. I would not say that person-first is ableist, rather the insistence of person-first language is a symptom of compulsory able-bodiedness because it means that one is refusing to listen to disabled people who feel their disabilities contribute to who they are. While I could stick with identity-first language because it reflects my personal preference, I have decided to use both because the approach this thesis takes is to write in a way that appeals to a wide variety of experiences. Therefore, as a small

[8] Jim Sinclair, 'Why I Dislike Person First Language', *Autonomy, the Critical Journal of Interdisciplinary Autism Studies* 1, no. 2 (2013), http://www.larry-arnold.net/Autonomy/index.php/autonomy/article/view/OP1/html_1.
[9] Cf. Roger Collier, 'Person-First Language: What It Means to Be a "Person"', *Canadian Medical Association Journal* 184, no. 18 (2012): E935.
[10] Cf. Dunn and Andrews, 'Person-First and Identity-First Language', 259.

stylistic choice, I switch between identity-first and person-first language in recognition of the different experiences and preferences of people with disabilities. They are not a monolith.

In order to answer the question of how disability can be of benefit to understanding the relationship between Christ's two natures, Chapter One will begin by examining the concept of disability and the two main models of disability, the medical and the social models. In outlining these two models, I will consider their strengths and limitations and address how this study will engage with both models while proposing an approach that takes greater account of the body than the social model tends to allow but without reverting to the medical model.

Having established how disability is understood, I will then explore how theology has responded to disability. I will begin with some of the areas where theology has had a contentious relationship with disability, such as theodicy, sin, healing, and the afterlife. What all these areas have in common is that they treat people with disabilities as a problem and an Other. Then I will outline how disability theologians have developed theological anthropologies that take greater account of human limits and vulnerabilities, which makes clear disability is not abnormal but a part of being human.

The chapter will then turn to the ways that Christ has been interpreted within disability theology, particularly the emphasis on vulnerability and limitations. As part of this discussion, I will examine how Christ's wounds have been related to disability and the critiques of this connection. I will also explore the different ways that kenosis has been related to disability. I will then examine how disability has been related to the cross and the potential dangers of this association. Finally, I will articulate the different ways that Moltmann and Aquinas offer resources for further developing a disability Christology, while also highlighting the potential problems that follow.

In Chapter Two, the central task will be to evaluate the theological anthropologies of Aquinas and Moltmann and to identify the normative values which impact how the body and disabilities are understood. Although Aquinas does not have a concept of disability engaging with his theological anthropology reveals the contours of how he might approach disability. While the focus of this chapter is important in and of itself because it exposes the resources and challenges for disability theology, it also provides the necessary building blocks for a

Christological study. Examining how each theology understands the human person will be crucial for assessing how their Christologies align with or diverge from those anthropological commitments. This chapter will also highlight key difficulties for constructing a disability Christology, particularly, how sin is understood to impact creation and the status of creation.

Chapter Three will focus on how to relate disability to the incarnation, looking at two areas: Christ's physicality and his intellect. Examining these two areas using a disability hermeneutic will make apparent the values of both theologians and how they impact disabled people. The central idea that Christ takes on a human nature that is vulnerable and has limits suggests that disability is compatible with the incarnation. For Aquinas, there are two main challenges that will be dealt with. Firstly, the idea that Christ takes on common physical defects in order to heal humanity of the effects of sin risks making vulnerability a consequence of Original Sin rather than an inherent part of creation. Secondly, Aquinas's view that Christ in his human nature cannot be understood to lack any knowledge. In different ways, these two aspects of Aquinas's Christology pose challenges for a disability Christology that affirms the limits of Christ's humanity as part of the goodness of creation. Moltmann puts forward a social Christology that helps to emphasise Christ's vulnerability and dependence on others. However, there are difficulties with his Christology that need to be addressed. Firstly, Moltmann understands mortality as being related to sin, and this leads him to argue that Christ takes on a sinful nature, which risks suggesting disability is tragic. Secondly, one of the dangers in placing such an emphasis on relationships and the contributions of others, particularly the Father and the Spirit, is that the agency of the Son is lost. It is necessary that while interdependence is recognised, it does not require creating a lack in the person of Christ.

Chapter Four will turn to the cross, a particularly difficult area for disability theology because one of the dominant stereotypes about disabled people is that their lives are defined by suffering. At the same time, it is equally important not to deny their suffering or to force them to be perfectly content. The central question guiding this chapter will be how one can connect disability to the passion narrative in a way that resists the narrative of tragedy and allow for a counternarrative that acknowledges the suffering without endorsing ableist norms.

I will begin with Moltmann's understanding of the cross which emphasises that God suffers in solidarity with the victims of history out of love. His theology allows vulnerability and suffering to be connected to God, which could allow Christ to be thought of as disabled.

However, Moltmann places such an emphasis on Christ's suffering that this raises the question of whether it merely continues to centre on what happens to Christ, the act of disablement by another, and fails to provide a counternarrative beyond the resurrection. I will examine then whether the greater role that Moltmann gives to the Spirit in his later writings has the potential to provide the needed counternarrative to the suffering that is identified in his earlier work.

A different set of concerns will emerge from Aquinas's interpretation. The question will be whether Aquinas sufficiently allows for Christ to be vulnerable on the cross, both mentally and physically. He presents Christ as suffering but there is a high level of control and joy, which risks minimising Christ's struggle. Nevertheless, his understanding of Christ experiencing both joy and suffering, with the distinction between natures, allows for a greater counternarrative to be developed that affirms dignity amid suffering. The joy can be a form of defiance; however, this will require examining another aspect of Aquinas's thought which is the importance of Christ's obedience in contrast with Adam's pride. I will ask whether Adam's pride can be reinterpreted as a rejection of vulnerability, and whether Christ can be seen as fully embracing vulnerability without shame, despite the derision of others. Finally, I will briefly consider what the argument made in this chapter means for the resurrection of the body, which often has a curative logic.

In Chapter Five, the focus will turn to how divine power relates to the human person and the need to resist compulsory able-bodiedness. I will begin by examining God's relationship with the world as it has an impact for the relationship between Christ's two natures. Critics have argued that Aquinas views God as self-sufficient that he is distant from creation, as well as that God's omnipotence can be dominating. From a disability perspective, these attributes of God might appear to support ableism. However, I will explore how divine gratuity relates to the attributes of God and why it suggests that one's existence is the basis of one's worth, not one's actions. This raises another question that I will address, which is whether it devalues human agency and activity.

The next area that I will examine is Moltmann's social ontology. Many disability theologians have argued relational understandings of personhood are a better model than views that rely on intellectual capabilities. I will consider whether Moltmann's approach sufficiently safeguards against those who lack healthy relationships and whether it risks implying that these people are suffering from a deficit. It is necessary to clarify the integrity of the human person

without relying solely on human relationships, because this could introduce a curative dimension, where others are making up for an absence.

These conversations will be brought together in considering Christ and the relationship between his two natures. Neither one of Christ's natures can be understood to be making up for a deficit found in the other. I will argue that divine support is not understood to be curative but respects the integrity and limits of Christ's human nature. The image of a mobility aid will be used as a constructive metaphor, because it suggests that Christ is not given an advantage and that it respects human agency. Finally, I will answer in what way I think one can say that God can be described as disabled and addressing the danger of how God could essentialise what it means to be disabled.

Chapter One
Approaching Disability Theologically

Introduction

The goal of this chapter is to examine how disability is understood both within models proposed in disability studies and in theology. While there is now a substantial and growing body of scholarship in disability theology, significant questions remain, particularly regarding how to relate disability to Christ. Since this thesis addresses what disability reveals about Christ's humanity and divinity, it is necessary to first clarify how disability is being conceptualised and how it will be used as a critical lens. In doing so, this chapter establishes the framework for analysing how disability challenges theological assumptions about embodiment, agency, and divine power. This chapter proceeds in three parts. First, it considers the hermeneutical task of interpreting the body and disability through different models of disability, each of which introduces further challenges for interpreting the body. Such analysis demands critical engagement with concepts of normality and abnormality, as well as other cultural norms that impact embodiment. The second section offers a literature review, focusing on the emergence of vulnerability as a key concept in disability theology. It identifies unresolved questions that remain within the field, exploring how it is shaping not only theological anthropology but also Christology. Particular attention is given to the unanswered questions that arise at the level of systematic theology. Finally, the chapter outlines how the theologies of Thomas Aquinas and Jürgen Moltmann both challenge and support the existing literature. It offers initial insights into how their respective theologies provide constructive resources for disability Christology while also generating further critical questions.

1.1. The Hermeneutical Challenge of Defining Disability

1.1.1. Disability as a Medical Abnormality and Deficiency

To be able to discuss disability, one is faced with the difficult task of trying to define or describe what bodies are. Sarah Coakley observes that bodies are "ubiquitous and yet so hard to get our 'hands' around."[11] Bodies can seem objective because they can be measured, weighed,

[11] Sarah Coakley, 'Introduction: Religion and the Body', in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 2.

and touched. Although bodies appear to be objective, it is important to be cognisant that looking at the human body is a hermeneutical task. One does not look upon bodies neutrally; therefore, it is necessary to be aware of the lens that one is using, as well as the potential biases which could distort one's perspective. If one focuses on the physical and biological aspects of the human person, one risks turning the body into an object. There is a need to investigate concepts such as what is regarded natural and normal, as well as one's reactions to those who are seen to be different.

While disabled people have existed throughout history, the medical model emerged primarily in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. At this point, the definition of disability that was emerging focused on abnormality or deficiency in the mind or body of the individual. Therefore, disability is treated as a problem in the individual, which means that the response focuses on either managing or fixing the impairment. In this paradigm, disability centres on deviating from what is considered to be normal human functioning. The medical model frames disability as a result of a contrast: a normal person can see whereas the blind person cannot.[12] Lennard J. Davis has argued that the concepts of normality and abnormality are a result of the study of statistics, which was beginning to be applied to the body in the nineteenth century. It led to the idea that being the norm or average was seen as a sign of progress and that it should be what one aims to be.[13] When the average is what is acceptable, those who fall on either extreme of the bell curve are deemed to be deviants.[14] The statistics were not simply used to neutrally describe people; rather there was a presumed understanding of how human bodies and minds were meant to function. There is a move from the descriptive to the normative. As a result disabled people are understood as lacking or abnormal when compared to the norm or average.

Alongside statistical ideas of normality, two aspects of the nineteenth century further shaped modern understandings of disability: the rise of evolutionary science and industrialisation. Evolutionary thought framed disabilities as contrary to survival of the fittest, legitimating eugenic practices designed to eliminate traits considered undesirable.[15] Industrialisation reinforced this logic by valuing efficiency and productivity, casting disabled people as social and economic "burdens" rather than contributors, as they were assumed unable

[12] Cf. Elizabeth Barnes, *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 13.
[13] Cf. Lennard J. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (Verso, 1995), 25–27.
[14] Cf. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 29–30.
[15] Cf. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 32–36.

to fulfil these ideals.[16] Together these developments constructed disability as a variance from the norm or ideal, a variance that was assumed to diminish one's quality of life, cause suffering for the individual and make them "victims of a personal tragedy".[17] While eugenics does not have widespread support, the idea that disability needs to be cured or prevented continues to exist.

The medical model presumes itself to be an objective and descriptive rather than normative through appeals to statistics and observation, but this ignores that the disabilities that are identified are being interpreted through value-laden assumptions.[18] Having identified a variance, a judgment is made that one is lacking an important good, and, as a result, there is the view that the disabled person would be in a better position if they did not have the disability. While in the nineteenth and twentieth century, this resulted in eugenic practices, this disposition continues albeit more often in subtler ways. The problem of how people with disabilities are seen in society can still rely on the view that they are burdensome and deviate from the ideal. One area where this can be seen is with the choice to abort a foetus who has been diagnosed with a disability. Without examining all motivations for such abortions, the concern expressed by disability activists is that "As with discrimination more generally, with pre-natal diagnosis, a single trait stands in for the whole, the trait obliterates the whole. …nobody finds out about the rest."[19] The medical model focuses on what might make the person seem abnormal or what it is seen to be lacking, and the response is how to make one as normal as possible. While there are medical officials who are willing to accommodate the disability and make it manageable, people with disabilities report subtle pressure toward correction or cure. The encouragement of abortion after a disability diagnosis, research into the causes of disabilities, and an assumption of the desirability of cures can all be seen as reinforcing the view that disability should not exist. The problem is not that medical researchers and practitioners are intending to be ableist but that many of these practices operate on the presumption that it is better to be normal.

The medical model was not simply a pre-existing model that was challenged later; rather it was conceptualised by disability activists and scholars to explain how medical

[16] Cf. Douglas C. Baynton, '"These Pushful Days": Time and Disability in the Age of Eugenics', *Health History* 13, no. 2 (2011): 49–50.
[17] Edurne García Iriarte, 'Models of Disability', in *Disability and Human Rights: Global Perspectives*, ed. Edurne García Iriarte et al. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 16.
[18] Cf. Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 16.
[19] Erik Parens and Adrienne Asch, 'The Disability Rights Critique of Prenatal Genetic Testing: Reflections and Recommendations', *Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities Research Reviews* 9 (2003): 42.

professionals interpret disabled bodies and how these interpretations shape wider social attitudes.[20] Scholars, such as Richard M. Zaner and Drew Lede, have observed that Western medicine and science often reduce the human body to a corpse because people's internal perspectives about their own bodies are often dismissed and undermined.[21] This difference of perspectives is clearest when it comes the disability paradox, which consider why many people with disabilities report that they have a good quality of life when external observers seen their daily lives as undesirable. The difference between perspectives centres around what is considered a good quality of life, which for non-disabled people is often understood to an understanding of good health that focuses on a properly functioning body. However, disabled people often focus on relationships rather than how their bodies function.[22]

The medical model is dismissive of disabled people's narratives that challenge it. For example, while the medical model might view a Deaf person as someone who cannot hear and see that as a loss, there are Deaf people who view themselves as a community with their own language, and culture.[23] The medical model overlooks this type of experience because it recognises only individual impairment and not disability as a shared cultural or communal identity. But viewing disability primarily as a tragedy, as Elizabeth Barnes argues, restricts how one imagines disabled flourishing.[24] If a disability is viewed as the cause of suffering, then the eradication of a disability would appear to be the logical solution. But such a view fails to acknowledge the complexities of disability, from the impact of societal values and environment to the different ways that people relate and conceptualise their disabilities.

The medical way of approaching the human body is part of a larger intellectual historical tendency that treats the body was seen as secondary to the mind, and therefore treated as an object. Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel observes the tendency to say that one *has* a body rather than one *is* a body. This linguistic move reduces the human body to its functions, "that it

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[20] Cf. Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (Routledge, 2014), 19–20.
[21] Cited in Susan Wendell, *The Rejected Body: Feminist Philosophical Reflections on Disability* (Routledge, 1996), 120.
[22] Cf. Gary L. Albrecht and Patrick J. Devlieger, 'The Disability Paradox: High Quality of Life against All Odds', *Social Science & Medicine* 48 (April 1999): 977–88, https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(98)00411-0; cf. Jaime Konerman-Sease, 'Moral Distress and the Disability Paradox', Center for Bioethics University of Minnesota, 21 March 2022; for a recent study cf. Lisa I. Lezzoni et al., 'Physicians' Perceptions Of People With Disability And Their Health Care', *Health Affairs* 40, no. 2 (2021): 297–12, https://doi.org/10.1377/hlthaff.2020.01452.
[23] Cf. Deborah Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology: Embodied Limits and Constructive Possibilities* (Oxford University Press, 2008), 97.
[24] Cf. Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 185.

[the body] does what we want it to."[25] But it is not simply a matter of language; it both creates and reflects a way of approaching the body and therefore, it impacts people's relationships with their bodies. If one sees the human body as a possession, it can create a distance between the individual and their body, encouraging the view that it is an instrument and therefore, it is not a central part of the individual. Disability and human limits are seen as failure to what the body should be able to do. The instrument is failing to obey the mind. One's view of the body also has epistemological consequences; it will lead to the evaluation of whether knowledge can come from the body and its senses, and if it is of any value. As John M. Hull observed that while it was known that through the body one could receive knowledge, it was not always recognised historically how the body impacts one's ability to construct the world.[26] The ability to see means that many assume they know how the world is, but Hull points out that those who can see, just like people who are blind, are constructing the world through their bodies.[27] Creating a dualism between spirit/soul/mind and the body leads to the construction of hierarchical binaries. Sharon Betcher sees the binary between disabled and able-bodied as underpinning other binaries, such as sex and race. She cites Aristotle's view of women as "deformed males".[28] Some bodies are being designated as Other or "deformed" and therefore, their perspectives are not deemed as valid or as contributing anything to the body of knowledge. Identifying one as disable can be a form of delegitimization, implying that one's difference means that one's perspective lacks authority or value.

1.1.2. Disability as a Social Phenomenon

Once its normative assumptions are recognised, the limits of the medical model become clear. It focuses on individuals, overlooking larger social causes that impact people with disabilities. For this reason, the social model of disability was developed. Barnes describes the social model as "a family of views" that have two main aspects. Firstly, there is a distinction made between disability and impairment. Secondly, disability is "entirely" created by social prejudice.[29] Impairment is defined by Disabled People's International as "the functional limitation within the individual caused by the physical and mental or sensory impairment."[30] Unlike disability,

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[25] Elisabeth Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body: New Ways of Embodiment* (SCM Press, 1994), 1.
[26] Cf. John M. Hull, 'The Broken Body in a Broken World: A Contribution to a Christian Doctrine of the Person from a Disabled Point of View', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 7, no. 4 (2004): 9, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1300/J095v07n04_02.
[27] Cf. Hull, 'The Broken Body in a Broken World', 9.
[28] Sharon Betcher, 'Liberative Theologies of Disability', in *Introducing Liberative Theologies*, ed. Miguel A. De La Torre (Orbis Books, 2015), 233.
[29] Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 25.
[30] Colin Barnes and Geof Mercer, *Disability* (Polity Press, 2003), 66.

according to Tom Shakespeare, impairment is "individual and private".[31] Disability is a social construction, which comes "from the environment and social institutions, by the way they are built and operate, which systematically disadvantage individuals with impairments and therefore oppress them."[32] Shakespeare identifies disability as being "structural and public."[33] The social model of disability highlights how the problems that people with disabilities experience are not only from impairment, also from societal norms that define certain bodies as "normal," resulting in prejudice, discrimination, and marginalisation. This social model brings to the focus both physical and attitudinal barriers that disabled people face.[34]

As part of the social model of disability, there is an emphasis placed on critically examining the norms and structures that oppress and create disabled people. Therefore, it is important to define ableism, which has been described as a form of oppression and a bias against disabled people, although frequently unnoticed.[35] Ableism can have many forms, but it involves a "the compulsory preference for non-disability".[36] Ableism can be expressed as "the favoritism for certain abilities, for example, cognition, competitiveness or consumerism, and the often negative sentiment towards the lack of favored abilitiesIdeas such as meritocracy create the impression of equality by suggesting that advancement is based on individual effort, yet they often overlook how worth is implicitly tied to one's capacity to function as a productive worker.[37] This framing obscures structural exclusion, especially for people with intellectual disabilities. Jennifer Scuro argues that ableism comes from *somatophobia*, the fear of the body, and it transforms the needs of some people as deficiencies and therefore, the real fear is left unaddressed.[38] There is a fear of losing control of one's body, which means that disabled people are feared and pitied. This dynamic preserves distance between bodies considered ideal and those deemed unacceptable.[39] This negotiation may involve some toleration, rather than complete hostility but this does not mean that one is actually accepted. It means that one has been given a space to exist without challenging the ableist status quo.

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[31] Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Fifth, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2017), 197.
[32] Iriarte, 'Models of Disability', 17.
[33] Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', 197.
[34] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 25.
[35] Cf. Jennifer Scuro, *Addressing Ableism: Philosophical Questions via Disability Studies* (Bloomsbury, 2019), xix.
[36] Carli Friedman and Aleska L. Owen, 'Defining Disability: Understandings of and Attitudes Towards Ableism and Disability', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (2017), https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i1.5061.
[37] Cf. Dan Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies: Theorising Disablism and Ableism* (Routledge, 2014), 29–30.
[38] Cf. Scuro, *Addressing Ableism*, xxvi.
[39] Cf. Goodley, *Dis/Ability Studies*, 22.

The consequences of what is deemed as being normal are evident across daily life. This normativity functions to exclude, and people with disabilities face barriers and marginalisation. Shakespeare sees the value of the social model of disability as its capacity to break "the link between our bodies and our social situation and to focus on the real cause of disability, i.e., discrimination and prejudice".[40] Without a social aspect, the implication is that the challenges one faces, such as the inability to enter a building, are the failure of one's body, rather than a failure to design a building in a way that recognises a diversity of needs. It moves away from individual bodies being seen as a problem and instead widens the scope and asks the critical questions of why particular groups face disadvantage, what causes the marginalisation and oppression, and what societal measures can help to remove the barriers faced by people with disabilities. Part of what is necessary to examine are the ways in which both disabled and non-disabled bodies are created. The latter is presumed to be normal, and as Davis argues, it is necessary to look at the construction of so-called "normal" bodies.[41] It is from that idea of normality that disability is created as an Other.

Rosemarie Garland-Thomson put forward the concept of "normate," which is "the social figure with which people can represent themselves as definitive human beings. Normate, then, is the constructed identity of those who, by way of the bodily configurations and cultural capital they assume, can step into a position of authority and wield the power it grants them."[42] While few may in fact be a normate, it is seen as the model of what one should want to be, and those who cannot present themselves as normates are viewed with pity and fear. Conversely, Susan Wendell uses the term "rejected body" as a way of referring to bodily experiences, such as disability, that are feared and ignored. People with disabilities are "constant reminders to those who are currently measuring up that they might slip outside the standards".[43] But Wendell observes that they can also be "reassuring, in that encountering them can make 'normals' feel more 'normal' by comparison".[44] To ensure that disabled people are not simply an Other, there is a need to get away from the idea that normalcy is better in order to allow for a variety of ways in being human.

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[40] Tom Shakespeare cited in Barnes and Mercer, *Disability*, 67.
[41] Cf. Lennard J. Davis, 'Introduction: Disability, Normality, and Power', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Fifth Edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2017), 1.
[42] Rosemarie Garland Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 8.
[43] Wendell, *The Rejected Body,* 89.
[44] Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 89.

Examining the way that society creates concepts, such as disability, has allowed disability theorists to unmask many of the hidden normative assumptions that have been disguised as being natural rather than a social phenomenon. Yet one of the dangers that disability scholars like Susan Wendell and Ellen Samuels have recognised is that if one solely focuses on culture and societal forces, one risks ignoring the lived experiences of bodies, particularly the experiences of disability, suffering, and illness, that do not have a societal cause.[45] Recognising how social structures fail to accommodate disabled people is essential to change the attitudes around disability, disabilities are more than simply social factors. The difficulty with the social model of disability is whether impairment and disability can be divorced from each other. As Jenny Morris observes, the social model has "a tendency… to deny the experiences of our bodies, insisting that our physical differences and restrictions are *entirely* socially created."[46] If the social model was correct, one might imagine that people with disabilities could be "cured," if a society stopped disabling a section of its population. But Barnes argues that there are unanswered questions about the social model when it comes to impairment, which become apparent when asked "Is impairment something that's (by itself or intrinsically) bad for you? Should we try to eliminate impairments?"[47] In not spending time with these questions, it allows the status of impairments to have an ambiguous status. The problem is no longer located in the disabled person's body as the medical model argues. But it is not clear whether the social model has made impairments neutral. Instead it leaves unanswered what the status of how impairments are to be interpreted. Furthermore, the focus on societal injustice has meant, according to Liz Crow, that impairment is seen to be a taboo, even though many people with disabilities are frustrated and pained because of those impairments.[48]

Moving beyond a narrow interpretation of the social model of disability is necessary because it allows for greater complexity in human experience. It cannot be solely an emphasis on the social or physical aspects if one is to accurately portray the realities of disability. Wendell argues that one needs:

> to strike a balance between, on the one hand, thinking of a body's abilities and limitations as given by nature and/or accident, as immutable and uncontrollable, and, on the other hand, thinking of them as so constructed by society and culture as to be controllable by human thought, will, and action. We need to acknowledge that social

[45] Cf. Ellen Samuels, 'Critical Divides: Judith Butler's Body Theory and the Question of Disability', *NWSA Journal* 14, no. 3 (2002): 58–76. and Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 44.
[46] Jenny Morris cited in Barnes and Mercer, *Disability*, 68. Emphasis in original.
[47] Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 26–27.
[48] Liz Crow cited in Susan Wendell, 'Unhealthy Disabled: Treating Chronic Illnesses as Disabilities', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, Fifth Edition, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Routledge, 2016), 164.

> justice and cultural change can eliminate a great deal of disability while recognizing that there may be much suffering and limitation that they cannot fix.[49]

This is not to argue that the criticisms of the medical model are invalid, but instead to make clear that the body has a role in determining one's experience of disability. This needs to be handled with care to avoid any suggestion of biological determinism. Narratives that understand disabled people as burdens or as being tragic can have an implicit determinist dimension because the disability is assumed to the disabled person's entire life is determined to be full of suffering. One of the reasons why the social model was an important development was because it enabled disabled people to be viewed as "active members of a society" rather than just "victims of a personal tragedy".[50] This change of narrative changed the way disability was being constructed. However, it is necessary to also adopt what Teodar Mladenov calls a "weakly realist" position, which "means that even when the body is regarded as completely dependent for its meaning on mediation, it is usually tacitly acknowledged that some bodily difference, independent from mediation, is required in order to 'trigger' mediation, to make it shape this meaning."[51] The example of only having stairs in a building disabling a wheelchair user would see the stairs as making "the bodily difference of non-walking… to show up as intrinsically restrictive."[52] This means that disability is not treated as simply a given of the body, but that it is "assembled."[53] Siebers, who also sees a need for a greater sense of realism when it comes to the body, argues that it is not about claiming that "the body exists apart from social forces" but that "The body is alive, which means that it is as capable of influencing and transforming social languages as they are capable of influencing and transforming it."[54] The relationship between the social and physical reality of disability needs to reflect that complicated reality. It is not enough to pay attention to the social context or the bodily limits faced by people with disabilities, but how the different factors relate to each other.

1.1.3. Approaching Disability Going Forward

Looking at both the medical and the social models of disabilities reveals that neither model fully captures the experiences of disability, which reinforces the question posed in this section: how to define disability. One response is to take an approach that attempts to hold onto both the

[49] Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 45.
[50] Iriarte, 'Models of Disability', 17.
[51] Teodar Mladenov, *Critical Theory and Disability: A Phenomenological Approach* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 43.
[52] Mladenov, *Critical Theory and Disability*, 44.
[53] Mladenov, *Critical Theory and Disability*, 44.
[54] Tobin Siebers, 'Disability in Theory: From Social Constructionism to the New Realism of the Body', *American Literary History* 13, no. 4 (2001): 749.

social and physical aspects of disability with the aim to take the criticisms and strengths of both models. In doing so, it acknowledges the limitations and creates a degree of tension between the two aspects. The social aspect should not be ignored, as it is clear that without acknowledging it, one misses many of the cultural norms and infrastructure that exclude and ignore people with disabilities. There is also a problem that, if one does not consider any of the social factors, parts of disability are at risk of being seen as a core feature rather than a result of the larger context. But the social aspect should not result in ignoring the impact of impairments, which many have argued have not received adequate attention. For this research, these two models will be useful to analyse different theological positions throughout this thesis. It is necessary to note where theological ideas align in particular with the medical model, where they are adopting the same logic of lack or abnormality, presuming the need for a cure.

As this is a work of theology, it is necessary to acknowledge that impairments are placed in an interpretive framework, rather than being treated as merely descriptive. Furthermore, as this work focuses on Jesus Christ, it will require social analysis to consider how he might be understood to connect with the social experience of ableism. This involves evaluating whether theological norms reinforce or challenge ableist assumptions. The social model is not disembodied; it affects people's bodies, most clearly in the physical dimensions of oppression against people with disabilities. The key question is whether Christ and disabled people are only connected through the experience of oppression, or whether this connection also includes the reality that comes with being disabled on a deeper level. In other words, is it just what happens to the body or the makeup of the body? While the cross can be understood as an act of oppression, other aspects, such as what Christ can do and know, reflect normative values, raising further questions about how Christ's embodiment is understood. This project does not intend to diagnose Christ with any disability, but it is necessary to consider how Christ's embodiment is understood, which combines a recognition of social factors with attention to the individual's physical makeup.

It is not only holding onto both the social and physical aspects of disability that is required, but also to avoid reducing disability to simply a negative or a positive phenomenon. Viewing disability from a medical perspective focuses on identifying a deficiency or abnormality compared to the "ideal" or "normal" human, framing that deficiency as a tragic loss. As Barnes argues, "the loss of intrinsic goods" that is part of disability is still "neutral with

respect to well-being."[55] It is necessary to get away from the view that a disabled person's life is one of suffering, unless one finds a cure. This negative view of disability has an impact on the status of disability and the ability to imagine that it is a life worth living. This narrative cannot be allowed to dominate and needs to be challenged. As a result, some disabled people have spoken of the positive ways that disability has impacted their lives. It has been pointed out that disability offers different perspectives, particular awareness and empathy towards other marginalised groups, and strengths, such as perseverance and adaptability. When it comes to understanding how Christ might relate to disability, it has to be considered whether it is only in the suffering and the oppression caused to his body or if there can be any other relationship with disabilities and limits.

There are risks in putting forward a positive view of disability as a corrective to negative narratives. Some of these dangers are similar to the social model's limitations. For example, emphasising positivity risks overlooking the reality of impairments. But there are also challenges that are unique, for example, the idea that disability can be seen as a superpower or that disabilities come with qualities that compensate for the hardships. This may be an attempt to counteract the negative narratives, but there is still an expectation that the disabled person should perform a certain ability. For example, people with Down syndrome are often viewed as being very happy, and one could see this happiness as a type of compensation for the physical and intellectual abilities that are affected by their Down syndrome. There are several issues with this idea. Firstly, this is a misconception about Down syndrome, as people with Down syndrome have a range of emotions. The second point is that this rhetoric, like the headline "People with Down syndrome are happy. Why are we trying to eliminate them?", puts the emphasis on their ability to be happy.[56] This narrative might help to counteract accounts that emphasise hardship and may reduce abortion rates after diagnosis, but it continues to express the ableist assumption that one's value is based on what one does, rather than putting forward an acceptance that is unconditional. The idea of disabilities having compensations or being superpowers also can contain the implicit suggestion that their value or their quality of life would be lower without it. Focusing on the strengths that come with a disability can help with acceptance of one's disability, but it should neither ground worth nor function as compensation. This is why I want to move beyond the narrative of suffering to an approach that is affirming while still acknowledging the real challenges that come with being disabled. The aim of this

[55] Barnes, *The Minority Body*, 58.
[56] Jeanne Mancini, 'People with Down Syndrome Are Happy. Why Are We Trying to Eliminate Them?', *The Washington Post*, 24 August 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/posteverything/wp/2017/08/24/people-with-down-syndrome-are-happy-why-are-we-trying-to-eliminate-them/.

thesis is to hold onto the complexity, so that it is not characterised by being entirely positive or negative. This should ensure that harmful ableist narratives are challenged, while also being honest about the difficult realities. In short, this multi-dimensional account of disability forms the interpretative framework for the theological and Christological analysis that follows.

1.2. Literature Review

1.2.1. The Problems with How Disabled People Have Been Understood Theologically

Many disabled people have had experiences with Christianity that cast a negative judgment on their disabilities. For example, Amy Kenny describes the experience of being a visibly disabled person in a church, and how an unknown woman approached her to say that God has told her to pray for her because he wants to heal her. She writes that these kinds of encounters focus on a need to fix her and that her "body becomes public property they feel they have the right to control. …Belonging shouldn't have the admission price of assimilation."[57] Kenny is not unique in this experience. Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson's work brings together the stories of disabled people's experiences of churches and Christianity. One aspect that they found is that many churches approach healing in ways that make disabled people feel that they are "less than human" and that healing would make them normal, by healing the deficit.[58] This mirrors the medical model, simply transposed into a religious setting: disability becomes a deficit to be corrected. Healing is one of the areas, along with eschatology, theodicy, and Original Sin, that causes tension between disabled people and theology because it treats disability as a problem that must be dealt with.

Deborah Creamer identifies four trends when it comes to how disabled people have been viewed theologically: they are "symbols of sin," "images of saintliness," "signs of God's limited power or capriciousness," and "personifications of suffering".[59] In each case, disability becomes a deviation rather than a normal aspect of creaturely life. The idea that disabled people are saints, who accept their suffering without any complaint or letting it set them back, is a way for disabled people to be tolerable to non-disabled persons. The result is that it upholds the status quo because the experience of disability is kept on the level of the individual, without

[57] Amy Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request: Disability Justice in the Church* (Brazos Press, 2022), ch. 1.
[58] Cf. Naomi Lawson Jacobs and Emily Richardson, *At the Gates: Disability, Justice and the Churches* (Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2022), 160–61.
[59] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 36.

engaging in any social critique. There are plenty of verses in the Bible that draw a connection between having a disability, for example, being blind (cf. Isa. 35:5; Lev. 21:18-20; Matt. 9:27-34; 11.5; and 12:22), means that one is sinful, possibly justifying discrimination and means that one needs healing. This view of disabled people is worsened with the view that disabled people are physical signs of the Fall. When it comes to being the personification of suffering, it allows for disabled people to be pitied and simply objects of charity, which can be paternalistic with no sense of love, and ignore questions of justice. It feeds into the final area that Creamer identifies, which is that God's power and will is questioned because of the existence of disabled people. Unless image of saintliness, disabled people are framed as deviations from the proper order of creation, existing in a state that is deficient, tragic, or awaiting repair. It makes disability difficult to accept theologically as anything other than a cause for lamentation.

The lives of disabled people are often viewed through the lens of theodicy. There is an assumption that disability cannot be part of God's intended order and, therefore, disabled people need curing, whether in the immediate term or at the eschaton. There has been much attention given by disability theologians to how to imagine disability in heaven. Non-disabled people have appealed to heaven as being a time when one will no longer be subject to suffering, but Nancy Eiesland felt "having been disabled from birth, I came to believe that in heaven I would be absolutely unknown to myself and perhaps to God."[60] There is an assumption that disability is a completely negative experience and the best version of the person is the one without it. Disability is imagined as a temporary defect, not a constitutive aspect of creaturely identity, so resurrection is construed as corrective erasure. For example, Frances Young writes of her disabled son Arthur that "There is no "ideal Arthur" somehow trapped in this damaged physical casing. …I find it impossible to envisage what it would mean for him to be "healed" because what personality there is is so much part of him *as he is,* with all his limitations."[61] The question is to what extent disability is understood as part of the person or if it should be reduced to one's identity. Furthermore, it is necessary to ask what the eschatological hope is expressing, how much is it genuinely about the end of suffering or about desire for normalisation and the end of human limits.

[60] Nancy Eiesland, 'Liberation, Inclusion, and Justice: A Faith Response to Persons with Disabilities', *Impact Feature Issue on Faith Communities and Persons with Developmental Disabilities* 14, no. 3 (2001), https://publications.ici.umn.edu/impact/14-3/liberation-inclusion-and-justice-a-faith-response-to-persons-with-disabilities.
[61] Frances Young, *Face to Face: A Narrative Essay in the Theology of Suffering* (T & T Clark, 1990), 61–62. Emphasis in original.

These concerns have led to a lot of re-engaging and reevaluating what the resurrection of the body means. Amos Yong has argued for a dynamic understanding of the risen life, drawing on Gregory of Nyssa's *epectasis,* the soul's perpetual journey. Rather than a singular transformative event that leads to complete perfection, it allows one to concentrate instead on continual growth and, therefore, help to break the binary of disabled and non-disabled. He argues that all bodies will participate in the good while retaining their particularity, so resurrection involves transformation without erasing continuity with embodied life now.[62]

Another important aspect Yong highlights, which other disability theologians echo, is that the resurrection is not simply about individual bodies but about transformed relationships.[63] Similarly, Brian Brock argues that the focus should be on the renewal of relationships. The problem identified with speculation on the risen body is that it leads to "the generation of universal norms" for human perfection but does not challenge present perspectives. There is a need to reckon with wrongful perceptions of one another and Brock argues that to label someone disabled is to misrecognise them, to treat them as an Other.[64] The result of what Yong, Brock, and others propose is to refocus on something deeper than just perfecting the body, onto *sozo,* the Greek word in the Bible often used for healing, which means "to make whole". All of humanity needs healing.[65] The distinction between cure and healing is crucial. Cure eliminates symptoms or disability, whereas healing, as Kathy Black describes it, concerns wellbeing, "a sense of comfort, support, and peace."[66] In this trajectory, resurrection is not a return to a pre-disabled ideal, but a restoration of creaturely integrity that honours disabled embodiment rather than removing it. Healing does not end disability.

While this approach has been broadly accepted by many disability theologians, there has been criticism of this approach. Critics argue that there has been a lack of appreciation of the difference between metaphysical identity and the idea of self, insufficient clarity on what can be cured and how that distinction should be made, the possibility of pain in heaven, and the claim that the focus on disability after the resurrection reflects human preoccupation on identity

[62] Cf. Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome: Reimagining Disability in Late Modernity* (Baylor University Press, 2007), 274–85.
[63] Cf. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 286.
[64] Cf. Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Baylor University Press, 2019), 187–88; 195.
[65] Cf. Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, ch. 1; Cf. Lawson Jacobs and Richardson, *At the Gates*, 174–75.
[66] Kathy Black, *A Healing Homiletic Preaching and Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1996), 48–51.

rather than reflecting anything about God.[67] The concern about what distinction should be made between what can be thought of as being cured is one of the biggest challenges for disability theology. It seems to be attempting to draw a distinction between disabilities that are acceptable and those that would be better not to exist. There are no neat solutions because distinguishing between "acceptable" and "unacceptable" impairments presupposes an external norm of embodiment. One can argue that people refuse to accept their disabilities due to internalised ableism, but it risks invalidating some perspectives. Rather than attempting to draw a line between what is to be cured and what is not, the focus needs to be on combating a curative logic, which the crip theorist Alison Kafer describes as "compulsory able-bodiedness/able-mindedness" rather than specific medical interventions. Kafer emphasises that this mindset "cannot imagine or comprehend anything other than intervention."[68] No one wishes to imagine an afterlife of eternal pain but there is a need to ask whether one's eschatologies are assuming that a lack of suffering comes with a particular kind of embodiment.

Another approach is to resist appeals to the eschaton. Sharon Betcher argues that rather than appealing to Eden or future eschatologies, theology must focus on the present. There is a risk that in looking in either direction, one is attempting to love the world while refusing to look at the world's pain.[69] Betcher can be questioned for refusing to draw on the doctrine of creation, because while interpretations of the Fall identify disability with the world's brokenness, there are resources for disability theology. At the same time, Betcher raises an important challenge for theology: how much should one look to the future? She identifies that often the Spirit has been made into a force that brings the world to its final perfection and that there is a need to live in the world as it is currently.[70] Betcher makes one question whether there is a need to not simply reinterpret one's approach to eschatology, and to ask if one needs to reconsider one's theological orientation and how much weight one gives to eschatology, perfection, and dialectics. Rather than simply appealing to the future, it may be necessary to begin to talk about

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[67] Cf. Terrence Ehrman, 'Disability and Resurrection Identity', *New Blackfriars* 96 (2015): 723–38, https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1111/nbfr.12126; cf. James Barton Gould, 'The Hope of Heavenly Healing of Disability Part 1: Theological Issues', *Journal of Disability and Religion* 20, no. 4 (2016): 317–34; cf. James Barton Gould, 'The Hope of Heavenly Healing of Disability Part 2—Philosophical Issues', *Journal of Disability and Religion* 21, no. 1 (2017): 98–116; cf. R. T. Mullins, 'Some Difficulties for Amos Yong's Disability Theology of the Resurrection', *Angelicum* 11 (2011): 24–32; cf. Alison Shely, 'The Unselfconscious Ableism of Disability Theory and Theology', *Church Life Journal*, 1 July 2024, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-unselfconscious-ableism-of-disability-theory-and-theology/.

[68] Alison Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013), 27.

[69] Cf. Sharon Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement* (Fortress Press, 2007), 21–22.

[70] Cf. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, xii; 37–38.

the value of creation now to avoid the suggestion that disability is just something that needs to be overcome.

1.2.2. Disability as Vulnerability and Limits

What these different areas reveal is the need to reframe how disability is approached theologically; therefore, this chapter now turns to the constructive work being done in theological anthropology. A central theme has been understanding that the human person is vulnerable. The exact wording used differs; along with vulnerability, theologians also refer to limits,[71] dependency,[72] and neediness.[73] Across these accounts, disability theologians repeatedly argue that human life is marked by vulnerability, rather than cultural ideals of strength, self-reliance, and independence.[74] As previously discussed, the belief that the human person should possess particular attributes leads to a variety of problems, which include the way that people with disabilities are judged. The medical model sees disabled people as being abnormal, lacking or deficient in a particular quality. Thomas Reynolds observes that there is "a cult of normalcy," which values certain bodies over others, depending on how they conform to that idea of normality.[75]

One of the crucial moves is to question the normative assumptions present in society and ask whether they are true. People with disabilities, whose embodied experiences frequently expose the friction between bodies and social expectations, often develop a more immediate awareness of human limits. This awareness challenges the cultural illusion that self-sufficiency is the norm. Moreover, finitude is not unique to people with disabilities, as John Swinton argues "Dependency, not autonomy, is one of the ontological characteristics of our lives."[76] Creamer recognises that there is a need to move away from viewing limitations as inherently evil. Instead, she argues "that limits are *good* or, at least not evil."[77]

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[71] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 31.
[72] Cf. Tim Basselin, 'Why Theology Needs Disability', *Theology Today* 68, no. 1 (2011): 50.
[73] Cf. Stanley Hauerwas, 'Suffering the Retarded: Should We Prevent Retardation?', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 8, nos 3–4 (2005): 97.
[74] For example, the theologies of Sharon Betcher and Stanley Hauerwas differ greatly. Betcher would connect ableism with colonialism, whereas Hauerwas would include it as part of his critique of modernity and liberalism.
[75] Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Brazos Press, 2008), Introduction.
[76] John Swinton, 'Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities', *International Journal of Practical Theology* 14, no. 2 (2011): 295.
[77] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94. Emphasis in original.

Creamer's anthropology of limits results in a spectrum of limits, overcoming the binary of non-disabled people and disabled people. All of humanity has limits, and at different times in one's life, the extent to which one is limited varies. As Creamer observes, if one lives a long life, one will experience disability.[78] The result of this framing is that it allows one to move away from the negative perspectives but see limits as being norm and allow one instead to consider how humanity lives with those limits.

Framing disability as part of having limits makes a crucial move, which is to break the binary between disabled and non-disabled people. Reynolds argues that disability theology is not simply about reminding people that they will not always be able-bodied; rather, remembering that everyone is vulnerable and dependent.[79] Both Reynolds and Brock recognise that disability is in part a construction of an Other, artificially separating one group from another.[80] The presence of people with disabilities has the potential to be what Reynolds refers to as a "dangerous memory," which holds societies, theologies, and churches to account. It critiques the dominant way in which normality is constructed.[81] Disabled people are often used to represent what a society fears: a lack of control and efficiency, and therefore, their presence is disruptive. At the same time, Joanna Leidenhag warns that portraying disabled people as prophetic risks continuing to see disabled people as suffering, lacking, and fragile, and in doing so, overlooking their gifts and the need to include and empower them.[82] There is a delicate balance between challenging the ableist values and inadvertently reaffirming them.

Disability can confront theological assumptions, but it is necessary to avoid reducing disabled people to what causes discomfort. The possibility being articulated here is that rather than alter people's perception of disabled people, it continues to Other disabled people. Brock has pointed out that studies have shown that aesthetic repulsion towards "nonstandard bodies" does not dissipate simply through repeated exposure; it requires recognition of how this contradicts their ethical positions.[83] He goes on to argue that to see God in everyone, it requires that one does not give in to the discomfort and instead investigate the reaction and the societal forces that feed it. But a crucial aspect of what Brock argues is that he focuses in on the

[78] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93–96.
[79] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 4.
[80] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 1; cf. Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 95.
[81] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, Introduction.
[82] Cf. Joanna Leidenhag, 'Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship', *Journal of Disability and Religion* 26, no. 2 (2022): 212–13.
[83] Cf. Brian Brock, *Joining Creation's Praise: A Theological Ethic of Creatureliness* (Baker Academic, 2025), 478.

problem not being the disabled person; the shocked person's perception must change.[84] The difficulty with using humans as a way to shame others is that there is still the potential to only focus on what has been done to the disabled person, and there is the potential to miss that they are in possession of dignity. They are not simply instruments of suffering that shame others. This project must consider whether relating disability to Christ functions merely as a reversal of power, positioning the weak to shame the strong.

Understanding vulnerability and limits as inherent to being human shows that disability is not an abnormality. Some of the language that has been used in relation to limits and vulnerability, such as ontology, suggests that these are integral to being human and part of creation. As Creamer points out, since early Christianity, there has been a view of humans as limited and dependent on God.[85] Human vulnerability is based on one's relationship with God and the doctrine of creation, and, as a result, limits are not simply a result of sin, but rather, it is part of having been made mutable. Such a view demonstrates that there is a way to approach disability without seeing them as an Other. However, one of the challenges is that one can mix up dependency on God with other vulnerabilities, limits, and needs because it is possible to imagine humanity prior to the Fall as being dependent and non-corruptible. There is a risk of conflation between the two, which risks making theological positions appear more open to disabilities than they actually are. Affirming that humans are limited and dependent on God does not necessarily reject the view that some limitations are contrary to God's intentions.

Human dependency on God also points to human interdependency and relationality. One criticism raised by disability theologians has been the emphasis on rationality as the basis of personhood and *imago Dei*, because although it does not explicitly exclude people with disabilities, it can implicitly position them as inferior.[86] Recognising mutual vulnerability allows a move away from focusing on individual autonomy and rationality to a relational ontology. Mary Jo Iozza argues that the relationality of the Trinity means personhood is oriented toward communion and solidarity, rejecting segregation.[87] Similarly, Hans Reinder,

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[84] Cf. Brock, *Joining Creation's Praise*, 500–501.
[85] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 94.
[86] Cf. Keith Dow, 'Toward Accessible Faith & Flourishing: Reconsidering Greek Intellectualism in Western Christian Theology', *Journal of Disability and Religion* 26, no. 4 (2022): 439–45; cf. Molly C. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability: Human Being as Mutuality and Response* (Fordham University Press, 2012), 94–99; cf. Hans Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2008), 227–31; cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 1.
[87] Cf. Mary Jo Iozzio, 'Solidarity: Restoring Communion with Those Who Are Disabled', *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health* 15, no. 2 (2011): 141–42; 144.

along with Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, draws on John Zizioulas to argue for a trinitarian account of personhood centred on love and community.[88] This understanding of personhood means that one is constituted by one's relationships.

While this approach moves away from rationality as the basis of personhood, Leidenhag questions whether this creates a different set of anthropological norms that discriminates against autistic people, who struggle with social interactions.[89] This concern extends beyond autism to anyone whose disability impacts their ability to socialise. It raises the question of whether personhood is being implicitly tied to communicative capacity, thereby suggesting a deficit in those who struggle to relate in socially normative ways. A distinction must be made between a need for other people and implying that there is a lack or deficit in an individual that requires other people to be considered a person. One of the problems is whether relations need to be seen as momentous and therefore, impact other people. Furthermore, if relations are treated as constitutive to human personhood, there is a risk of creating a curative logic where others are needed to be a person, without which implies a deficit in the individual. Rather than relying on actions, one might be better served by an account of personhood that is inherent. The only relationship that seems to be dependable is God and therefore, in focusing on how God chose humanity first. However, rejecting relational accounts of personhood at the human level also carries risks, particularly that disabled people may be understood primarily as recipients rather than as contributors to the lives of others.

1.2.3. Christ as a Vulnerable and Disabled Figure

The focus on vulnerability does not just allow for a theological anthropology that is conscious of disability, but it also allows for connections with Jesus Christ. Since Eiesland's *The Disabled God*, where Eiesland re-imagines Christ as disabled, a number of other disability theologians have examined how Christ is understood, focusing on interrelated themes such as his humanity, his flesh, his weakness, and his wounds, connecting them to experiences of disability. Christ's title Emmanuel means "God is with us," and it is an indication of divine solidarity, but it leads to the question of how and in what way? The incarnation means Christ's particular body is meant to relate to other human bodies, but the theological problem is how that body is

[88] Cf. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 252–72; cf. Myroslaw Tataryn and Maria Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability: A Theology For Embracing Difference* (Novalis, 2013), 77.
[89] Cf. Joanna Leidenhag, 'The Challenge of Autism for Relational Approaches to Theological Anthropology', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 23, no. 1 (2021): 132.

imagined. What is emphasised can create exclusionary norms. There is a need to recognise how class, race, culture, gender, and sexuality can be weaponised, which leads to M. Shawn Copeland's question, "Have we turned the (male) body of Christ into a fetish or idol?"[90] Copeland warns that Christ's body is never neutral; how it is imagined shapes who counts as included in him. Similarly, Elizabeth Johnson argues, "Male images allow men to participate fully in it [the divine], while women can do so only by abstracting themselves from their concrete, bodily identity as women."[91] Like other theologies that reflect on the experiences of marginalised identities, disability theology asks how disabled people can relate to Jesus. For example, Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris ask, "How can Jesus, who was a non-disabled person, identify with people with disabilities?"[92] There is a need to consider what it means for Christ to be the perfect embodiment of being human without reinforcing compulsory able-bodiedness. The themes previously explored in relation to theological anthropology have a new relevance as one considers Christ's relationship with disability.

What Eiesland and others have done is not only included disability in their Christologies but shown the relevance of disability for Christology. Eiesland by arguing that Christ is the disabled God, drawing a connection between his wounds from the cross that continue to exist after the resurrection and the experience of disability.[93] She has inspired others to take up the idea of Christ as the disabled God, or similar concepts, including Reynolds, who describes Christ as an "icon of a vulnerable God".[94] In calling Christ disabled, Eiesland sees an act of re-symbolisation occurring, which can "give rise to subversive thought and action."[95] Similarly, Sallie McFague describes metaphor as "a word or phrase used *inappropriately*."[96] Though metaphor and symbol are not identical, McFague's account shows how naming Christ as disabled can seem "inappropriate" to some, exposing the theological assumptions that privilege able-bodiedness. Daniel Rempel has described Eiesland's work as "provocative," however, at the same time, he goes on to suggest that her work is "best read as a struggle against Docetism and other related Christological heresies, which see the work of Christ

[90] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Fortress Press, 2010).
[91] Elizabeth Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.* (The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2017), 56.
[92] Roy McCloughry and Wayne Morris, *Making A World of Difference: Christian Reflections on Disability* (SPCK, 2002), 64.
[93] Cf. Nancy Eiesland, *The Disabled God: Toward a Liberatory Theology of Disability* (Abingdon Press, 1994), 98–101.
[94] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 6; cf. Burton Cooper, 'The Disabled God', *Theology Today* 49, no. 2 (1992): 175–79; Cf. Lamar Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism: Dismantling the Hierarchy of Bodies in the Church* (Brazos Press, 2024), 111–17; cf. Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, ch. 9; cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 32; cf. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 174–79.
[95] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 98.
[96] Sallie McFague, *Models of God: Theology for an Ecological, Nuclear Age* (Fortress Press, 1987), 33.

removed from the humanity of his person."[97] Rempel acknowledges that Eiesland does not explicitly frame her work in this way, however, it is clear that for Eiesland, "Christ… became disabled for us."[98] Many of those who have taken up the idea of a disabled God have done so only partially, often focusing on symbolic appropriation rather than developing Eiesland's insights within systematic theology.

Before turning to the more systematic and constructive engagement with Eiesland's work, it is necessary to engage with Swinton's criticisms of Eiesland's disabled God. Swinton questions the idea that the resurrected Christ's wounds can be interpreted as a kind of disability, because the wounds do not indicate any change to what Christ can do, rather, they appear to have no limiting effect, since he can walk through walls. Swinton says that Christ is scarred rather than disabled. Furthermore, he points out that it does not fit with the social model of disability, because those wounds are the *result* of oppression rather than the cause. He also interprets those wounds as signs of hope and redemption rather than disability.[99]

Swinton's second criticism is that Eiesland and other liberative theologies fail to sufficiently acknowledge the universality of God's love as they create a more inclusive theology. The danger is that one either creates an exclusive theology that merely recentres another group or uses images that might be politically useful but "theologically confusing".[100] Swinton argues that the language of Reynolds, who focuses on vulnerability rather than disability, is necessary, because despite the similarities between the two, there is an important difference. By using the term vulnerability rather than disability, he claims, it allows for the binary between disabled and non-disabled to collapse. Swinton argues that it means that "the vulnerability of disability is revelatory of the nature of human beings and of God" and, therefore, it is not a declaration that Christ is disabled.[101] To call him disabled, in Swinton's view, continues the practices of categorising people.

Swinton overlooks key aspects of Eiesland that would address some of his concerns. While Eiesland is attempting to recontextualise Christ, she does not invert a hierarchy of knowledge. It is Eiesland's contention that the image of the Disabled God would be liberative

[97] Rempel, 'Wounded for Us', 323.
[98] Rempel, 'Wounded for Us', 323.
[99] Cf. Swinton, 'Who Is the God We Worship?', 284–85.
[100] Swinton, 'Who Is the God We Worship?', 284–86.
[101] Swinton, 'Who Is the God We Worship?', 293.

for some people beyond disabled communities, although she does not specify who she has in mind.[102] The judgment against certain forms of embodiment impacts more than just disabled people. Lamar Hardwick argues that ableism and racism are closely related, because they both deal with what differences are accepted.[103] For Hardwick, Eiesland's Disabled God has consequences for both disabled and Black Christians, because "God's image is radiantly shining through what was once despised".[104] The point is that this approach challenges what is valued. To have a separate set of symbols for those who are disabled, Eiesland argues, would further the segregation that disabled people already experience, and that separate symbols "would deny our real interdependence with able-bodied persons."[105] Compulsory able-bodiedness is not just harmful for those who are currently disabled, it impacts what is valued for everyone. In response to Swinton, the key point is that Eiesland does not centre disability in order to create a new form of exclusion, but to resist compulsory able-bodiedness and reveal a liberation shared by many marginalised groups.

Furthermore, the identification of Christ's wounds with oppression is not a new phenomenon. As Lisa Powell points out, James Cone connects Christ's crucifixion with those who have been tortured and oppressed, therefore, the wounds are not only a mark of redemption but also signs of solidarity with persecution.[106] Swinton is right to point out that Christ's oppression does not come from being physically different, and, therefore, there is a need for caution because it is not a direct comparison. There is the question of whether one wants to identify disability with violence. Disability can be a result of violence, but the problem is whether one wishes to make the association between Christ and disability a violation of his bodily integrity. Disability risks being reduced to suffering. However, Eiesland's focus is not on the crucified Christ, but the risen Christ who remains scarred, and therefore, the focus is also on challenging one's idea of the ideal body and compulsory able-bodiedness.

In Swinton's preference for Reynold's language of vulnerability, there is the question of what a disability Christology is doing by calling Christ disabled. Following Rempel's argument that what is at stake is to make clear the reality of Christ's humanity, one might feel that one is losing the specificity of disability and that one has returned to Christology in general. But what that misses is a key observation by Eiesland, which is that "ignoring disability means

[102] Cf. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 105.
[103] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 16.
[104] Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 114.
[105] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 92.
[106] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 27.

ignoring life," or as Rempel rephrases it, "attending to disability means attending to life".[107] What disability brings to Christology is a framework that questions any compulsory able-bodiedness, namely, the ideas and values that distance doctrine from the reality of Christ's humanity. Disability theologians repeatedly point out that in becoming flesh, Christ becomes contingent.[108] As Rempel argues, the disabled Christ results in embracing human contingency, which requires recognising that being human means not being in control of one's life.[109] This anti-docetic spirit appears in Amy Kenny's description of the incarnation as Christ becoming a body, which includes "all the snotty bits we blush about."[110] What needs to be recognised is that to attend to Christ's contingency and vulnerability is already to attend to disability. The question is whether Christologies sufficiently engages with aspects of Christ.

Another area with potential for disability Christology is kenosis. However, only a few disability theologians have explicitly acknowledged it. Kenotic Christologies draw on the hymn in Philippians 2, which says that Christ "did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself" (vv. 6-7, NRSV). There are a variety of ways in which kenosis can be interpreted both in general and specifically in relation to disability. Amanda Shao Tan imagines Christ as disabled because he is taking on limitations. She contrasts Christ's nature as divine and human and treats the difference in power and potential between them as the act of disability. Christ has "forfeited" his divine nature.[111] Shao Tan's account leaves the meaning of forfeit unclear, and this ambiguity risks construing disability as a lack or deficit. Others, such as Creamer and Reynolds, argue that God is already limited and vulnerable, which would suggest a different understanding of kenosis.[112] Reynolds views Christ as revealing the divine nature, and therefore, Christ's vulnerability is not limited to his humanity.[113] Reynolds follows Moltmann in suggesting that creation is a kenotic event.[114] Because omnipotence has already been rejected, the kenosis of the incarnation does not empty Christ of divinity but reveals it. Divinity is not defined as power but love and relationship. According to Reynolds, this is not a

[107] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 13; David Rempel, 'Disability Contra Docetism: Following the Disabled Christ', *Vision: A Journal for Church and Theology* 25, no. 2 (2024): 79.
[108] Cf. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 99; cf. Justin Erik Allen Glyn, '"Et Homo Factus Est:" Incarnation, Disability and Interdependence', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 22, no. 1 (2022): 50; cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, Introduction.
[109] Cf. Rempel, 'Disability Contra Docetism', 80.
[110] Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, ch. 9.
[111] Cf. Shao Tan, 'The Disabled Christ', *Transformation* 15, no. 4 (1998): 11–12.
[112] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 112; cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 5. Creamer's work does not look at the incarnation specifically, but in arguing for a God who has limits, the consequence would be that kenosis in the context of the incarnation would not mean that Christ's limits and vulnerabilities would be completely new.
[113] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 6.
[114] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 5.

denial of God's power but a recognition that God's power is "not domineering" but relational and seeks to share with others.[115] On this account, vulnerability is not contrary to divine life; such a reframing of divine power challenges ableist valuations of independence and invulnerability. However, there is an unanswered question of whether this reduces the significance of the incarnation as the event where the Word takes on human vulnerability. Furthermore, this assumes a particular reading of omnipotence, which is that it is both domineering and ableist.

One of the most important contributions to disability Christology is Powell's *The Disabled God Revisited,* which developed Eiesland's insights further with the help of Bruce McCormack's interpretation of Karl Barth. What McCormack's reading of Barth allows Powell to develop is an interpretation of the disabled God that does not rely solely on the violence of the crucifixion but on who God is eternally, grounding this not in pre-incarnate essence but in the divine identity constituted through election and incarnation.[116] McCormack argues that God is not triune prior to the decision to create, but rather God's triune identity is the consequence of choosing "to be a God of creation, covenant, and incarnation."[117] As a result, Powell argues that there is a close connection between creation and who God is. God is constituted by his relationship with creation, and Powell claims that he needs creation for the fulfilment of divine life, which is brought about through the incarnation.[118] What this means is that, prior to the incarnation, the Son exists in anticipation of being, as humanity is taken up in order to become God-human.[119] As part of the election of Christ, he did not just determine to be flesh but specifically broken flesh that is an outcast, and therefore, the Son was always anticipating becoming disabled.[120] Christ is not just disabled because of the violence of others but because he is not independent and is "shaped for relation of receptivity."[121] The receptivity is not viewed as passivity by Powell but as the recognition that the Son needs the contributions of others.[122] Because Powell rejects attributes such as omnipotence, it means that her approach to kenosis does not refer to the emptying of these attributes; rather, it refers to the addition of human nature. This addition is fundamental to Christ, it becomes God's humanity, and therefore, the human experiences of Christ become part of divine life.[123]

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[115] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 6.
[116] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 63.
[117] Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 41.
[118] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 44.
[119] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 52–53.
[120] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 57.
[121] Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 63.
[122] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 82–83.
[123] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 65.

Powell's work continues to challenge the values of ableism, such as self-reliance, and to argue that qualities like need are not shameful because they are found even in God. God needed creation to be who he determined he would be. Rempel points out that Powell's position means that the incarnation "is not an extra add-on to the eternal life of God".[124] The question that arises is whether this is the right approach for interpreting the economic and immanent Trinity, because, according to Powell, the economic Trinity forms the immanent Trinity, rather than reflecting the immanent Trinity. In effect, it collapses the distinction between them. In many ways, it is logical to say that God needs humanity to be who he is, because the idea that Christ is saviour only makes sense in the context of creation. At the same time, the view that the immanent Trinity is revealed by the economic Trinity makes clear that Christ communicates the nature and the values of who God is eternally. The act of revelation or self-communication differs from what Powell is putting forward, which is the act of defining oneself. There is a subtle difference between the two, because what Powell is arguing for is about making God who he is rather than declaring who he is. The difference has consequences for the kind of disability Christology one develops, as well as the relationship between God and creation. Powell argues that kenosis should be understood as an addition to Christ's divinity rather than an emptying of his divinity, but, at the same time, by arguing that he needs his humanity, there is the implicit suggestion that there is a deficit or a gap in the Son.

Like many disability theologians, Powell argues that classical theism upholds the values that support ableism, but the consequence is that one loses the sense that creation and the incarnation are completely for creation, not God.[125] Attributes like aseity are not necessarily about valuing independence, rather they are about the gratuity of creation. Powell views God as also needing the gifts of others. What this means for disability theology is the question of whether one is focused on establishing the goodness of creation without reference to any action, which is needed to counter ableist accounts of worth, or whether one is to follow Powell, where God needs others, a view which emphasises the agency and actions of disabled people whose agency is often disregarded. The latter can be seen to continue to place one's worth on action, whereas the former focuses on the inherent dignity of the human person. This relates to Christ's humanity because it relates to the question of kenosis and whether one is looking for a gap in either nature to allow for the other. Powell's view that the Son anticipates his humanity risks suggesting that there is effectively a hole to be filled, a condition to be cured. It needs to be

[124] Rempel, 'Wounded for Us', 324.
[125] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 37.

asked whether the two natures approach allows for the integrity of both natures, rather than creating a lack. Powell's understanding of kenosis as the assumption of human nature with its limits is important for disability Christology because it does not draw a parallel between kenosis and disability that relies on the creation of a deficit, but it raises the question of whether there is a need for greater appreciation of the integrity of Christ's two natures.

1.2.4. The Cross as a Disabling Event

In envisioning Christ as disabled, there is a need to consider how one understands the suffering of Christ on the cross, because interpretations of suffering determine how Christ's solidarity and disability are imagined. There is reason to be cautious when making connections between Christ's suffering and disability because disability has often been reduced to suffering. As previously mentioned, one of the problems with how theology has approached disability, which is that it is used to question God's goodness. Reynolds observes that theodicy is one reason that disability and theology have an "awkward relationship," because disability is being used as an example of something that has gone wrong in God's creation, overlooking the social dimensions of disability.[126] When viewed as a problem with the world, the focus is hoping that the disability will be fixed by God later. There is an assumption that there is a need for a justification for the experience. Betcher challenges this approach to disability, arguing instead that becoming disabled means "refusing to seam up the cracks that shatter our idealizations".[127] The consequence is that disability is not something that needs to be explained away. Rather, it is accepted without appeals to the transcendent, because appeals to transcendence are part of the mechanism of idealisation, which Betcher views as going against life.[128] When it comes to the question of theodicy, disability offers an approach which moves away from aesthetic judgements that weigh the good against the suffering. It allows the challenges and suffering that can come from disability to be acknowledged without allowing those realities to define disability and undermine its dignity. This is important not only for theological anthropology but also for understanding the passion and a Disabled Christ. How Christ is understood to suffer on the cross is central, because it is often connected by theologians to the question of theodicy and how others are to respond. The question then is how disability can be related to the cross without reducing disability to suffering.

[126] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 1.
[127] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 171.
[128] Cf. Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 171.

If disability is framed primarily as suffering, it can be viewed as one's cross to bear, and that one should suffer virtuously as Christ did. Eiesland observed that there are several stories and verses throughout the Bible, which present "disability as a temporary affliction that must be endured to gain heavenly rewards."[129] Daniel J. Louw points out that the Irenaean tradition, also known as soul-making theodicy, interprets the suffering in the world as a means to perfection and holiness. The impact of such a worldview, according to Louw, is that it makes suffering a virtue.[130] While neither author mentions the crucifixion specifically, there is a connection at the level of theological logic, because Christ, the epitome of virtue, suffered for others. If Christ's cry of abandonment (Mark 15:34; Matt. 27:46) is interpreted in a way where it is primarily a cry on behalf of humanity, then this could lead to the suggestion that his cry is not a personal lament and therefore, not an indication of his weakness. This is perhaps why disability theology has tended to be influenced by *theologia crucis.* Burton Cooper views the disabled God as connected to Moltmann's idea of the crucified God, because both names express the "christological suffering-love of God."[131] Cooper views Moltmann's Christology as indicating that Christ on the cross depicts God as weak and disabled, and that God participates in the world's suffering rather than transcending it. Just as Moltmann claims that on the cross, Jesus crucified brings those who are crucified into God's being, Cooper argues that a disabled God brings those who are disabled into God.[132] Christ's suffering on the cross is being connected with human frailty, weakness, and disability.

One of the major dimensions that needs to be examined is what meaning is drawn from the cross. The cross can be seen as showing solidarity with those who suffer from unjust structures, which includes ableism. Iozzio makes this point, describing the crucifixion as showing God's "solidarity to the social construction of societies' most despised."[133] It shows that God does not support the status quo. However, disability theologians do not treat Christ's disability as merely a social phenomenon produced by unjust structures. Christ on the cross is identified with "God's way of staying with us in the brokenness … to open up new possibilities for creativity there, just there where the pain and confusion are."[134] The challenge is that, in this formulation, disability risks being identified with brokenness while also claiming that disability does not mean that one is broken or deficient in some manner. As previously discussed, there is

[129] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 72.
[130] Cf. Daniel J. Louw, 'Virtuous Suffering and the Predicament of Being Handicapped: Towards a Theology of the "Disabled God Puffing in a Wheelchair"', *In Skriflig* 48, no. 1 (2014), http://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2305-08532014000100002.
[131] Cooper, 'The Disabled God', 176.
[132] Cf. Cooper, 'The Disabled God', 176; 179.
[133] Iozzio, 'Solidarity', 140.
[134] Anthony McClelland cited in Lawson Jacobs and Richardson, *At the Gates*, 145.

a need to recognise the pain of disability that is not simply a matter of social structures; this may be what is being recognised in discussing God as being present in people's brokenness. The cross can be a space for lamentation, of naming and experiencing grief, without the immediate expectation of a solution or an answer and this aspect of the cross can speak to those who are struggling and suffering being disabled. One knows that Christ also experienced that struggle, the tension of the not yet. However, the challenge is to also ensure that one does not re-instate the narrative that the life of someone with a disability is a life of suffering. The question is whether in trying to connect disability with Christ on the cross, disability theology has sufficiently balanced the need to deny attempts to reduce disability to suffering, as well as to understand that the pain that people with disabilities face is not simply about living in an unjust world. Furthermore, it needs to be considered how exactly Christ relates to that tension, because how exactly it is articulated will determine whether the cross will reduce disability to suffering.

One way to ensure that the suffering of the cross does not dominate one's understanding of disability is to make clear that while there is suffering, it is not the whole story. The resurrection is the obvious place for a counternarrative but there are two challenges. Firstly, whether the end justifies the means. Secondly, with the concerns of a curative logic, it is also important that the counternarrative does not begin with the resurrection, to ensure that disability is not viewed as something that must be contradicted. Hardwick's work is an example of a disability theology that has a clear counternarrative to the suffering on the cross. He observes how shame has been used to control the voices and bodies of those who are not deemed to be normal.[135] The crucifixion is identified by Hardwick as a method of control and shame by the Roman empire, which is why marginalised people, including disabled people, have seen the crucifixion as "a symbol of the systems that society has used to shame and, in many cases, disable and disenfranchise."[136] He writes that with the crucifixion, Christ's body was disabled as a socially imposed condition, in the sense that they "place shame on the bodies of its marginalized."[137] But Christ does not accept that shame, he "disregards" it.[138] Christ resists what others foist onto his body, and Hardwick sees joy as being part of that resistance. Christ is understood to smash the idol of normalcy.[139] In appealing to joy, Hardwick identifies a way in which the cross can be identified with disability but without allowing suffering to dominate. There is a need for more development of this idea of joy to make clear that it does not

[135] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 143–45.
[136] Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 146.
[137] Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 149.
[138] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 150.
[139] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 169–70.

negate the suffering of the cross. Furthermore, it could benefit from a more detailed Christological engagement, such as Eboni Marshall Turman, who argues for an incarnation ethics that attends not only to "what happens *to* the flesh by way of external factors, but what occurs as a priori, *in* the flesh as well".[140] This engagement with Christology would help in exploring how Christ rejects the shame associated with the body, being human, and instead embraces it.

1.3. The Potential Contributions of Aquinas and Moltmann for Disability Christology

In order to answer the question of my thesis, what does disability reveal about Christ's humanity and divinity, and their relationship with each other, I will be using the work of both Thomas Aquinas and Jürgen Moltmann. By examining them together, I will highlight how their contrasting theological frameworks generate different insights, resources, and challenges for disability Christology. I use Aquinas and Moltmann because each offers a distinct model for how Christ's humanity and divinity relate: Aquinas insists on the integrity of the two natures, while Moltmann locates vulnerability at the heart of divine life. Contrasting their approaches in the next four chapters reveals the core tension that this thesis investigates: whether vulnerability and limits belong to Christ's humanity alone or are they intrinsic to his divine identity as well.

Of the two, Moltmann has received more attention in disability theology. Armand Léon van Ommen identifies Moltmann as a key resource for disability theology, as is evident in the literature review above, where Moltmann's work has already been discussed.[141] Moltmann's understanding of the Crucified God has resources for a disabled God because he challenges many of the same theological concepts that disability theology rejects. For example, he rejects the idea that God is to be understood in terms of omnipotence, impassibility, and aseity. One reason Moltmann rejects classical theism is that it legitimates political rule by grounding it in divine power. In this framework, the emperor becomes "the visible image of the invisible God."[142] This fits the criticisms made by disability theologians, who argue that classical theism

[140] Eboni Marshall Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation: Black Bodies, the Black Church, and the Council of Chalcedon* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 57. Emphasis in original.
[141] Cf. Talitha Cooreman-Guittin and Armand Léon van Ommen, 'Disability Theology: A Driving Force for Change?', *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* 22, no. 1 (2022): 1.
[142] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God: The Doctrine of God* (SCM Press, 1983), 195.

implies that possessing power and independence makes one more godlike, and that disability, understood as being marked by limits, places one further from God. A hierarchy of being could be created with God as the epitome of able-bodiedness and disabled people at the bottom. This is challenged by another aspect of Moltmann's theology, which is that he emphasises that God's love means that God is vulnerable and affected by whom God loves. God's self-sufficiency is viewed by Moltmann as meaning that he cannot love.[143] One might suggest that the vulnerability of being human, of being disabled, is not other to God, rather, it is a way in which one can connect with God.

Moltmann's Christology does not simply treat Christ as an isolated individual but requires reference to those whom he spent time with, particularly, the marginalised, and to the Father and the Spirit. The result is that Moltmann stresses the interdependence of Christ and therefore challenges any suggestion that Christ is a perfect autonomous human, the ableist ideal. In Moltmann's account, there is a very real sense of need and relation present in Christ. Moltmann does not understand Christ's humanity as being separate from his divinity, and therefore, Christ's relationship and history also shapes the Trinity. The emphasis on Christ's relationships is valuable, but there is a need for caution on this point, because, as already indicated, there is the danger that a new form of ability is privileged. Furthermore, there is the question of whether Moltmann adequately safeguards the Word's agency and ensures that personhood is sufficiently differentiated from its social context. These are both critical for disability Christology because disabled people's agency has been denied and reduced to their circumstances.

A deeper issue with Moltmann's theology is the role that suffering and the absence of relationship have in forming one's personhood. Moltmann argues that the crucifixion shows not only Christ as human suffering, but also his divinity, since he does not draw a strict distinction between the two natures, and this allows him to argue that God is vulnerable and suffers in solidarity. There have been many critiques of Moltmann and the emphasis that he places on suffering, including whether he is sadistic, whether he eternalises suffering, or whether he creates an understanding of the passion narrative where Christ is effectively annihilated.[144] While these are important questions for theology in general, they are particularly

[143] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology*, 40th Anniversary edition, trans. R. A. Wilson and John Bowden (SCM Press, 2015), 229.
[144] Cf. Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', in *Christianity, Patriarchy, and Abuse: A Feminist Critique*, ed. Joanne Carlson Brown and Carole R. Bohn (The Pilgrim

pressing when drawing on Moltmann for disability Christology. Moltmann does not think that the crucified Christ only represents those who experience extreme suffering such as those who suffered in concentration camps, but argues that everyone can find themselves in the crucified Christ, including people with disabilities.[145] However, one of the challenges for disability in general is resisting the narrative that equates disability and suffering, and this becomes a problem because of the emphasis that Moltmann places on suffering. Moltmann understands Christ as identifying with those who are victims of unjust systems, which can include people who are disabled according to the social model. In this respect, he is one of them. While the identification creates solidarity and questions the way in which others have marginalised them, the difficulty is whether Moltmann goes too far in this identification.

Moltmann argues that on the cross, Christ is abandoned by the Father, and because he does not allow any distinction to be made between Christ's natures, this implies that there is a loss of relationship and that his personhood is impacted by the withdrawal. The question is whether this understanding of the passion narrative amounts to creating an absence, a wound in the person of Christ, which needs to be healed, and while this may not be a literal disability, it could be argued that Christ has been made disabled by the absence of the Father. This is why Moltmann's relational approach needs to be investigated, because while it allows God to connect with the precarious nature of being human, it risks leaving disability Christology without the counternarrative to how others judge disability, one that goes beyond simply identification.

While Moltmann is frequently cited in disability theology, its engagement with Aquinas has tended to centre only on two issues: the interpretation of *imago Dei* in theological anthropology and the resurrection of the body.[146] Looking at Aquinas's theology, there are

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Press, 1989), 19; cf. Gilles Emery, 'The Immutability of the God of Love and the Problem of Language Concerning the "Suffering of God"', in *In Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. James Keating and Thomas Joseph White (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 40–44; cf. Johann Baptist Metz, 'Suffering Unto God', *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 4 (1994): 619; cf. Dorothee Sölle, *Suffering*, trans. Everett R. Kalin (Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1975), 26.

[145] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', in *Human Disability and the Service of God* (Abingdon Press, 1998), 118.

[146] Cf. Richard Cross, 'Aquinas on Physical Impairment: Human Nature and Original Sin', *Harvard Theological Review* 110, no. 3 (2017): 317–38; cf. Ehrman, 'Disability and Resurrection Identity'; cf. Haslam, *A Constructive Theology of Intellectual Disability*, 95–99; cf. Miguel J. Romero, 'Aquinas on the Corporis Infirmitas: Broken Flesh and the Grammar of Grace', in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012); cf. Miguel J. Romero, 'Profound Cognitive Impairment, the Virtues, and Life in Christ', *Church Life Journal*, 26 August 2022, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/profound-cognitive-impairment-

aspects that are potentially useful for disability theology. Firstly, Aquinas understands the whole of creation as reflecting God more than any single creature. This acceptance of the diversity of creation suggests that people with disabilities also reflect God and are part of the goodness of creation. Secondly, Aquinas writes that "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it," which points to the potential in Thomistic theology for an approach where the divine is not in a hostile relationship with human nature.[147] There is the possibility to understand this as meaning that even as one becomes perfect through grace, it does not mean that one's nature has to be altered. One's limits and vulnerabilities are respected, and grace does not function as a curative dimension.

There are several challenges to this view, particularly, the notion of perfection, which risks excluding people with disabilities. Perfection for Aquinas refers to having attained the proper end, according to one's nature.[148] Humanity's proper end is understood as union with God; if this end is not interpreted as requiring the removal of disability, then Aquinas's account can be read as respecting human nature in its embodied limits. On this reading, human limits are not viewed as something that would need to end, however, there are difficulties, because Aquinas understands the body as being completely under the control of the soul, as well as the impact of sin on human nature.[149] Another difficulty is the extent to which an eschatological focus shapes interpretations of disability, because the dignity of disabled people needs to be grounded in the present, not simply at the end where one achieves the fulfilment of one's nature. There is a danger in treating disability as a temporary state and awaiting correction rather than as a valid form of human embodiment.

There are aspects of how Aquinas approaches creation and the human person, which have the potential to affirm the nature and limits of the human person, which not only has consequences for understanding disability in theological anthropology, but also for Christology. As observed by Rempel, disability is important for taking seriously the humanity of Christ, and therefore, Aquinas, in respecting the integrity of human nature in general and arguing that kenosis refers to the addition of his human nature rather than the emptying of his divinity, opens the possibility for an approach that takes seriously the integrity of Christ's humanity. One of the

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moral-virtue-and-our-life-in-christ/; cf. Michael Waddell, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Resurrection of the (Disabled) Body', *The Saint Anselm Journal* 12, no. 2 (2017): 29–64; cf. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 228–34; 385–94.

[147] Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, ed. Timothy McDermott (Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1989), 1.1.8.

[148] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.184.1.

[149] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, trans. Anton C. Pegis et al. (Hanover House, 1955), 4.87.5, https://isidore.co/aquinas/ContraGentiles.htm.

major questions in Christology is how to understand Christ's two natures and how to understand their relationship. If one argues that either nature requires a gap to make room for the other, the integrity of each nature risks being compromised. Aquinas, in retaining the distinction between the two natures, means that one can avoid this difficulty. It could allow human nature to be vulnerable and have limits without the suggestion that they need to be cured, which is a necessary part of any disability Christology. At the same time, there are difficulties, because Aquinas may respect human nature and even argues that Christ has some physical defects, but they must be compatible with his perfections.[150] But as the language of defect already indicates, there is the challenge that what might be regarded as disability or human vulnerability, is not regarded as part of human nature. This is further complicated by his understanding of Christ as possessing a perfect vision that includes the beatific vision, which can be regarded as creating greater distance between Christ and people with intellectual disabilities.

Another area where Aquinas has potential for disability theology is in his interpretation of the cross, because there is already a recognition of joy alongside the suffering. As previously mentioned, Hardwick argues that Christ having joy can resist the shame and judgment on the cross, and Aquinas offers an understanding of the cross where Christ is understood to be experiencing a mixed state, reflecting that Christ is experiencing both suffering and yet, because of the beatific vision, he is understood to have experienced joy because of his knowledge of the resurrection. While Aquinas does not frame his work through the lens of resistance, there is the possibility that Aquinas can provide the basis to further the insights of Hardwick and provide a necessary counternarrative to the suffering. The biggest challenge is the accusation that Aquinas does not sufficiently allow for Christ to suffer. He understands Christ as suffering, but there is the challenge of continual self-possession, which appears to prevent Christ from being truly vulnerable. This raises the question of whether Christ's joy as a form of resistance is constrained by perfect self-possession.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the challenges associated with interpreting the body and disability. It is necessary for theology, particularly for this project, that one understands that the body is not viewed objectively or neutrally. Both the body and disability are created and informed by social

[150] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.

structures, which create norms and ideals. However, the chapter has also criticised the social model of disability, because it can assume that disability is only a result of culture, thereby ignoring the embodied experiences of disabled people. For this project, therefore, I adopt a multi-dimensional approach to disability rather than solely a social model, so that neither disability nor the body is understood as purely a social or natural phenomenon. Going forward, it may seem that the cultural and social aspects will be more dominant in the analysis, as I question the norms and ideals present in theology. However, this approach is not divorced from people's bodily experiences. The question of who is being included and how they are included is about the reception and legitimisation of bodies. This is why impairment needs to be included in the discussion rather than viewed as private and irrelevant. The journey of accepting and struggling with one's disability needs to be acknowledged, which is a result of social forces, and yet, it is also a response to one's disability and body.

This chapter also considered the focus on vulnerability in disability theology and how disability theologians have connected it to both God and humanity. Seeing vulnerability as a central aspect of what it means to be human allows disability to be seen as part of what it means to be human rather than antithetical. The shared vulnerability should help to overcome the otherness of disability and create solidarity. This is connected to the way that some disability theologians have seen Jesus Christ, not just as vulnerable, but also as disabled. As already established, because Christ functions as the model of a perfect humanity, Christology shapes norms and ideals about what it means to be human. In interpreting Christ, there are key questions to consider: what does one identify as a significant aspect of Christ, and what are the norms that follow from that interpretation? These will continue to be important questions throughout this work, and it will be necessary to continually return to them as it explores the incarnation, the cross, and the resurrection.

One of the major questions that emerged in the literature review that I will investigate is how to understand the relationship between the divine and human. This connects to a variety of issues, from what it means to be human as opposed to divine, how one understands the relationship between Christ's two natures, and how one understands the doctrine of God. This is important for if and how one understands God as being disabled, although it is also necessary that one considers what one's understanding of disability is, as that will also have ramifications. Disability theologians have not tended to explore exactly how disability relates to Christ's two natures, which has resulted in a lack of clarity. Kenosis can be seen as the divine Son disabling himself, as Shao Tan suggests. However, disability theologians such as Reynolds do not see

disability or vulnerability as solely an aspect of the incarnation but also the doctrine of God. More recently, Powell proposes a different account, grounding disability in God's eternal identity shaped through election, rather than in crucifixion or kenotic subtraction. These differing approaches suggest that disability Christology requires further argumentation to clarify how disability relates to Christ's person and natures.

One of the challenges for disability theology is the historical links between disability and suffering, however, this has not resulted in a rejection of the cross. The approach that many disability theologians have made is that they see the cross as a place of solidarity, where God joins humanity in their brokenness and powerlessness. The difficulty with this approach is that, rather than challenging the association between disability and suffering, it risks reinforcing it. I have chosen to consider Moltmann's theology of the cross because of his influence in disability theology, and more importantly, because his Christology is rooted in the conviction that God is vulnerable and suffers. Yet, as already noted, Moltmann's emphasis on Christ's suffering raises concerns for disability theology. It must be asked whether the cross is interpreted in such a way that not only speaks to the experience of suffering but also challenges that suffering and provides a counternarrative. Drawing on Aquinas's understanding of Christ's suffering and experiencing joy has the potential to challenge the fixation of suffering. However, Aquinas risks the opposite problem: treating the cross as almost easy for Christ, because his interpretation does not adequately attend to the bodily and mental experience of the cross. Taken together, these questions establish the need for a sustained comparison between Aquinas and Moltmann to determine how Christ's humanity and divinity are understood without reinforcing suffering, idealising ability, or collapsing the distinction between Christ's two natures. The next chapter begins this work by examining Aquinas's and Moltmann's theological anthropologies, assessing whether their accounts create space for disability as part of human identity or reinforce the assumptions disability theology seeks to challenge.

Chapter Two

Disability in the Theological Anthropologies of Thomas Aquinas and Jürgen Moltmann

Introduction

Any attempt to develop a disability Christology must first consider how disability relates to human nature, before turning to Christ's humanity and limits. This establishes how disability is understood in relation to humanity, enabling a meaningful comparison with Christ. This chapter therefore evaluates the theological anthropologies of both Moltmann and Aquinas, exploring the ways in which disability might fit within their anthropological accounts. As observed in the previous chapter (p.17), dualistic understandings of the human person can have a detrimental impact on people with disabilities. The dichotomy between the soul and the body can result in disabled people being identified with corporeality or a lack of intellect and therefore being judged as inferior. It is necessary to challenge these accounts and to develop an anthropology that does not permit such a hierarchy. In different ways, both Aquinas and Moltmann have the potential to reclaim the body because they both share the conviction that embodiment is a crucial part of the human person. Reclaiming the body opens the possibility of seeing disability as part of humanity, rather than being reduced to a defect. A challenge for a theological anthropology that seeks to affirm people with disabilities concerns the relationship between sin and the human person, since disability has been interpreted as a sign of living in a fallen world. This chapter therefore asks whether vulnerability should be understood as a result of Original Sin or as an inherent part of creation. Addressing this question is crucial if theology is to avoid construing disability as a deficit to be overcome rather than a valid mode of human existence.

The first part of this chapter examines Aquinas's anthropology in relation to disability through a series of interconnected themes. It begins with his account of hylomorphism, focusing on the relationship between the body and the soul, as this provides the basic framework for understanding embodiment in Thomistic thought. Aquinas, in understanding the body as well as the soul as integral to the human person raises the question of whether it can allow for the affirmation of disabilities. One major consideration is how to categorise disability and its relationship to accidents and substance, and what the consequences are for how disability is understood. A challenge arises from Aquinas's view that the human person has a rational nature

because it has implications for people with cognitive disabilities. In addressing this, attention is given to the relationship between bodily disposition and cognitive capacity, since Aquinas acknowledges that material conditions can affect intellectual functioning. Finally, the section turns to Aquinas's account of prelapsarian humanity, since this shapes how bodily vulnerability, corruption, and limitation are interpreted within his theology. Across these themes, the analysis asks whether disability can be understood as part of creation or whether it is ultimately positioned within a framework of deficiency and privation.

In the second half of the chapter, the focus shifts to Moltmann's account of the human person, which he intentionally understands as being incomplete. Unlike Aquinas, Moltmann does not offer a sustained treatment on human embodiment; rather, it is dispersed in a variety of texts. As a result, this part of the chapter is more exploratory in scope. It begins with Moltmann's critique that there is too much emphasis on having a body rather than on being a body. The result is a focus on what the body does, whereas Moltmann argues that the human person is purposeless in the sense that it is not defined by function or instrumentality. It considers whether the idea that human existence is purposeless contradicts his eschatological framework. This raises the further question of whether Moltmann's theology, in which creation is understood as needing eschatological redemption from the beginning, limits the ability to speak of creation's goodness. This is particularly important from a disability perspective, in order to assert that disability is not necessarily a solely negative phenomenon. Finally, this section turns to Moltmann's writing on health and disability. He questions the ways that health has been defined, observing that it can be treated as an ideal that few can live up to. Moltmann recognises that disability is a created category used to designate people as an Other. I examine both the strengths and the potential challenges in Moltmann's engagement with disability, particularly the risk of framing disability itself as a gift.

2.1. Thomas Aquinas and an Anthropology of Comparison

2.1.1. Hylomorphism and the Status of Disability

To begin, this section will examine Aquinas's understanding of the human person through his model of hylomorphism, considering how this framework might inform a disability perspective on embodiment. Modern theologians, particularly feminist theologians, have criticised dualisms because they disparage the human body and material creation. This issue is relevant for people with disabilities as they are viewed as inferior because they are seen as more bodily and

corporeal than intellectual and spiritual. Aquinas puts forward an anthropology where the body is viewed as a critical part of the human person. Influenced by Aristotle, Aquinas develops the concept of hylomorphism further.[151] The word hylomorphism comes from the Greek words *hylē* meaning "matter" and *morphē* meaning "form", which shows that natural objects are comprised of *both* matter and form or soul.[152] By positing the existence of a soul, Aquinas is technically a dualist, but it differs from substance dualism. He rejects Plato's claim that the soul's relationship to the body is like a captain and its ship.[153] The person is not reduced to the soul nor is the body reduced to a temporary vessel. This is important from a disability perspective because it suggests that the body is not simply an instrument to human agency. Aquinas's approach has been characterised as a middle way between materialism and dualism.[154] In his own time, he was viewed as a materialist; however, this is distinct from modern materialism, since Aquinas rejects the view that everything is made up solely of matter.[155] A question that arises is whether Aquinas's rejection of substance dualism is enough to affirm disability. To assess this, it is necessary to further outline the relationship between the body and soul in Aquinas's hylomorphism.

Hylomorphism, as Aquinas articulates it, allows for the retention of the soul and the assertion that one is more than simply the material body, while also avoiding a twofold structure which reduces the body to simply being an instrument of the soul. At its simplest, the soul or form is understood to be what makes one alive. Aquinas understands all material creatures as consisting of both matter and form, which cannot be separated. Aquinas describes the form as "the first principle of life".[156] Without the soul, the body would be just a corpse. This could be interpreted as reducing the soul to the body so that the effect is that only bodies exist. However, Aquinas argues that the soul "is not a body, but the *act* of a body."[157] He maintains that

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[151] For a theological anthropology that is cognisant of people with disabilities, there is reason for caution when drawing on Aquinas due to the influence of Aristotle. Aristotle has several aspects to his thought which contribute to ableism, for example, his understanding that natural slaves do not possess personhood because he defines personhood in terms of rational decision making. However, Aquinas does not use Aristotle's work uncritically. As a Christian, he is committed to the idea that every human life is created by God. Cf. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. H. Rackham (Harvard University Press, 1944), 1.1254b. For an examination of Aristotle and ableism cf. Christopher Frey, "Aristotle's Irredeemable Ableism," Church Life Journal, August 05, 2020, https://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/aristotles-irredeemable-ableism/.
[152] Christopher Shields and Robert Pasnau, *The Philosophy of Aquinas* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 194.
[153] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones Disputatae de Anima*, trans. John Patrick Rowan (B. Herder Books Co., 1949), 1.
[154] Cf. Shields and Pasnau, *The Philosophy of Aquinas*, 147.
[155] Cf. Denys Turner, *Thomas Aquinas: A Portrait* (Yale University Press, 2013), 51.
[156] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.75.1.
[157]. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.75.1. Emphasis added.

something is needed beyond the body to account for one's life. Otherwise, he argues, each body would be that first principle.[158] As a result, the body alone is not sufficient to explain life; both a soul and a body are needed to be a living creature.

Forms are understood to actualise matter, arranging it into the particular object. It is the source of an object's unity and essential features. Following Aristotle, Aquinas understands prime matter as pure potentiality. It cannot exist on its own, it must become something or someone.[159] The form gives a thing its nature, so for a human, it informs the matter what it is to be human. This is why Aquinas asserts that the soul is the *first* principle of life, because even the heart also needs to be actualised. There is a need for a first mover of sorts that explains the organisation of matter.[160] For Aquinas, it was important to understand how things can change in a way that suggests order rather than constant flux and the soul is what provides consistency to the matter.[161] The human person grows from potentiality in the womb into the actuality of the human person and the soul informs the matter. However, the form is not simply the shape of the matter. As Robert Pasnau points out, if the form was merely the shape of the matter, then a statue which shares the shape of a human could also be understood as a human. It is a functional configuration.[162] It is the matter and form together that result in a body and a person. They are not separate substances, but as Aquinas writes, "the two of them together constitute one actually existing substance."[163]

Aquinas explains the relationship between the body and soul as being analogous to wax and a seal: the form is like the seal that makes an impression on the potentiality or matter of the wax. Both aspects are needed to make the wax seal.[164] The soul gives form to matter, in other words, its specificity. Aquinas distinguishes between two kinds of substance or form. The first type of substance refers to the nature of the individual, whereas the second kind of substance refers to the nature of the genus. As a result, the soul informs prime matter in two ways: by the individual's quiddity or specificity and by human nature. Importantly, Aquinas does not locate all the defining features of an individual or a species in the essence, many of the properties are

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[158] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.75.1.
[159] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *De Principiis Naturae*, trans. R. A. Kocourek (North Central Publishing, 1956), ch. 2, https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/DePrincNaturae.htm.
[160] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.75.1.
[161] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.119.1.
[162] Cf. Robert Pasnau, 'Philosophy of Mind and Human Nature', in *The Oxford Handbook of Aquinas*, ed. Brian Davies and Eleonore Stump (Oxford University Press, 2012), 151.
[163] Aquinas, *SCG*, 1.11.69.
[164] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, trans. Kenelm Foster and Silvester Humphries (Dumb Ox Books, 1951), 2.12.

understood to flow from the soul.[165] Another distinction is being made, this time between properties that belong to the essence, which makes one human, and those that are accidents, which are not part of the essence. This allows Aquinas to negotiate between a universal concept of humanity and individual diversity. He argues that the genus of humanity cannot be found, it is something which is shared by a variety of people. Even in the original state of innocence, one could find diversity in the humans that existed.[166] To illustrate this distinction between essence and accidents, one can use the example of biological sex. While Aquinas would understand that to be human is to be in possession of a sex, this does not mean that being male is part of the essence of humanity. If this was the case, it would mean that a female would be a member of a different species. In order to preserve unity in the midst of diversity, biological sex cannot be part of the essence, it is an accidental property.

Aquinas distinguishes between three different types of accidental properties. The first type is proper accidents, which come from one's species but are not part of human nature. Aquinas gives the example of being able to laugh, which he says is found in all humans. It is a sign that they have grasped something, and therefore, it corresponds with how Aquinas sees human nature as being primarily intellect, but laughter is not part of that essence although it comes from it.[167] The other two types of accidents are related to the individual. The second type are inseparable accidents, which permanently affects the individual. This would be how Aquinas would describe biological sex, while not universally shared in the same way, it must be found when that particular being exists. It is a permanent part of the individual.[168] Biological sex is the only example of an inseparable accident that Aquinas gives, although it does not necessarily rule out the possibility for others.[169] The third type are separable accidents, which are qualities that do not have to be present, nor do they always have to be there. He cites the example of sitting and walking, which one does not have to be able to do to be human, nor must one always sit or walk to attribute the ability.[170] From a disability perspective, it means that the perceived lack of ability is not equated as meaning that one lacks essential qualities. Bodily change is natural, and it does not threaten one's humanity. Rather, it affirms the natural diversity of creation.

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[165] Cf. Shields and Pasnau, *The Philosophy of Aquinas*, 86.
[166] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.96.3.
[167] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Being and Essence*, trans. Lottie H. Kendzierski and Francis C. Wad (Marquette University Press, 1964), 106.
[168] Cf. Aquinas, *QdAn*, 12.7.
[169] Cf. Aquinas, *QdAn*, 12.7.
[170] Cf. Aquinas, *QdAn*, 12.7.

The question that arises is how to classify disability in Aquinas's framework: is it a separable or inseparable accident? One cannot treat disability as a single phenomenon in this regard due to the diversity of disability. Disabilities that emerge during the course of one's life would be considered separable accidents because they are not permanent features in the individual. However, it is not clear whether lifelong disabilities are separable accidents. Terrence Ehrman has argued that lifelong disabilities, such as Down syndrome, are separable accidents in a Thomistic framework.[171] He bases this claim on the possibility that a future gene therapy could remove such conditions, which suggests that it cannot be a part of identity. It is seen as the equivalent of hair or health.[172] The consequence of lifelong disabilities being a separable accident is that it cannot be understood as a vital part of the individual.

However, lifelong disabilities could be interpreted as inseparable accidents. Lifelong disabilities are a constant in the individual's life and shape how the individual experiences the world. The difficulty is that Aquinas treats human nature as objective which comes into conflict with the subjective judgment that lifelong disabilities are an integral part of an individual. As discussed in the previous chapter (§1.1.3.), disability resists simple categorisation because it is both constructed and grounded in a bodily reality. This tension raises the further question of whether disability should be viewed as a natural phenomenon. A natural view of disability might allow it to be treated as the equivalent to biological sex and therefore, it could be viewed as an inseparable accident. Ludwig Siep observes that while nature is normally conceived as meaning being "independent of human will and wishes," the extent that anything can be regarded as independent of human will is minimal. The reality is that nature has been influenced by human behaviour.[173] Acknowledging this challenge is important because if one can conceive of the removal of qualities as a disqualification from being inseparable accidents, it suggests little if anything can be inseparable. One's bodily reality is to a certain extent a given reality and yet at the same time, one cannot ignore that it is a negotiation with the person's biological composition, the actions of the human person and wider cultural and environmental factors. One cannot completely control the body, although one still has considerable influence on it.

Aquinas's writing on defects provides the clearest insight into how he understood disability. One key instance appears in his writing about *privatio boni,* the privation of good.

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[171] Cf. Ehrman, 'Disability and Resurrection Identity', 732; 738.
[172] Cf. Ehrman, 'Disability and Resurrection Identity', 734.
[173] Ludwig Siep, 'The Value of Natural Contingency', in *The Contigent Nature of Life: Bioethics and the Limits of Human Existence*, ed. Dietmar Mieth et al. (Spinger, 2008), 8.

Aquinas writes that blindness is a punishment for sin in the sense that nature has been "left to itself, and deprived of original justice".[174] Putting to one side the question of Original Sin, which will be dealt with subsequently, how Aquinas understands blindness is that it is not an entity, but it is a deprivation of how things should be.[175] Richard Cross observes that Aquinas differentiates between several kinds of defects, all of which involve "teleological failures". There are defects "that destroy the organism," those "that destroy a natural principle of activity" which are incurable and those "that destroy neither the organism nor any of its natural principles of activity" which are defects that have not completely destroyed the capacity to do an activity and therefore, it is curable.[176] Incurable conditions would correspond with what might be regarded as a lifelong disability. To use more Thomistic language, one has a permanent defect, which as Cross points out is close to the medical model of disability because one is missing something that is needed for one's nature to be able to achieve one's *telos*.[177] Disability is being defined as the absence of a capacity proper to one's nature, and it would be better if it did not exist. Within Aquinas's theology, disability may have real effects on the individual, but it has no ontological status as it is an absence of a good. Consequently, it means disability cannot have any intrinsic positive value because any good will also come with the caveat that it derives from evil, which is defined by *privatio boni*, and therefore, it presumes that it would be better that the evil had not occurred. Disabilities inhibit one's ability to achieve their teleological goal and while there are examples of things being unable to achieve their *telos* that are not seen as a negative, this is not the case with physical impairments. Sight is a good that one should be able to have, according to Aquinas.[178] The consequence is that Aquinas imagines that blindness is naturally incurable and therefore, one must live with it, but it is construed as a tragic state. It is to be endured rather than affirmed.

Privatio boni is a difficult way of framing disability because it makes it hard to affirm disabilities as a neutral or positive phenomenon. While this approach is challenging for accounts of disability that seek to recognise disability as part of the diversity of creation, not every disability or symptom should be affirmed. As discussed in Chapter One (§1.1.3.), while one must challenge the narratives that reduce disability to suffering, it is vital that one does not overlook the real pain of disabilities. Conditions that involve chronic pain or violent seizures may not wish to be portrayed as being positive or neutral and therefore *privatio boni* as an

[174] Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.87.3.
[175] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *On Evil*, trans. John A. Oesterle and Jean T. Oesterle (University of Notre Dame, 1995), 1.1.
[176] Cross, 'Aquinas on Physical Impairment', 321–22.
[177] Cf. Cross, 'Aquinas on Physical Impairment', 322.
[178] Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 3.11.7.

understanding of disability can still be useful for framing *particular* aspects of being disabled. But there is a need for care when relating *privatio boni* to disabilities. Pain can be regarded as the absence of a good, but the challenge is not to reduce disability to these experiences. The challenge for disability theology and disability studies is that there is a real need to confront the normative presumptions which see every disability as a lack or abnormality because it presumes a narrow vision of the good life. At the same time, the pain that occurs with certain disabilities should not be uncritically accepted, even when expanding the idea of what human life consists of.

The question that emerges is whether it is necessary to follow Aquinas's understanding of disability as primarily being a defect. As Cross notes, although Aquinas conceives disability as a lack or impairment, the fact that Aquinas recognises that there are many goods for the human person, including external circumstances, suggests that one can use Aquinas to argue against "disabling environments," though this is not a concept that he would have known.[179] Furthermore, Aquinas's view that the purpose of law is the common good for all citizens could provide a framework for developing policies that are constructed to be attentive to disabled people's flourishing.[180] Therefore, there is some room to allow for a social model of disability in Thomistic theology, but only if the anthropological dimension of Aquinas's theology is bracketed and the focus is instead placed solely on questions of ethics.

Aquinas wrote in a context with different scientific and medical possibilities and, therefore, it might be seen as easier for one to set aside the anthropological dimensions in favour of practical moral reasoning. For Aquinas, an incurable condition could only be cured by God. However, in the contemporary context, with gene therapies, prenatal screening, and other medical interventions, it is clear that ideas of the good life and one's conception of the human person cannot be divorced from ethics. Aquinas's conception of disability does not allow one to move away from the medical model, as the focus continues to be on what is lacking. The question of whether lifelong disabilities are to be understood as separable or inseparable accidents can seem like one is using outdated categories, but they were a way of using the Thomistic framework to treat disability without reducing it to a privation. Nevertheless, within Aquinas's anthropology, being cured is always seen as better than existing with a disability.

[179] Cross, 'Aquinas on Physical Impairment', 337–38.
[180] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.96.1.

An alternative way to approach disability is to situate it within the context of creation's finitude and contingency. One might expect this approach, since Aquinas understands creation as finite and therefore, one can conclude as humanity was created this way that being finite is not evil.[181] However, in viewing disability as a privation of good, it becomes clear that Aquinas sees it as something different from normal finitude. As the overview of disability theology in Chapter One (pp.28-29) shows, terms like finitude and vulnerability are often used to bridge the gap between disabled people and non-disabled people, thereby challenging the cultural binary that separates these two groups. Yet, it is difficult using Aquinas to argue that disability is part of the diversity of God's creation. Without this affirmation of diversity, there remains the difficulty that people with disabilities are being identified as abnormal. As Nick Walker argues there is a need to move away from a pathology paradigm, which assumes that there is a "right," "normal," or "healthy," neurology, towards one where there is no normal or right neurology.[182] This paradigm shift is necessary to avoid compulsory able-bodiedness, particularly for considering what Aquinas's understanding of a rational nature means for intellectual disabilities.

2.1.2. The Body's Relationship with Cognitive Abilities

Aquinas's account of the human person is heavily influenced by Boethius, whose definition of personhood he adopts as "an individual substance of a rational nature."[183] The immediate question that arises from this understanding of personhood is whether the idea that the human person possesses a rational nature excludes people with intellectual disabilities. This question is important because it is not only the basis of personhood, but also what makes humans "properly" the image of God.[184] Gilles Emery notes that, for Aquinas, rationality implies that one possesses free will.[185] Reason is identified as what differentiates humanity from animals that are propelled by natural instincts.[186] This can result in some viewing people with intellectual disabilities as inferior because they are seen to lack the necessary component. One of the difficulties for people with intellectual disabilities is that they are sometimes compared to

[181] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.7.1-2.
[182] Nick Walker, 'Throw Away the Master's Tools: Liberating Ourselves from the Pathology Paradigm', *Neuroqueer: The Writings of Dr Nick Walker*, n.d., accessed 10 February 2023, https://neuroqueer.com/throw-away-the-masters-tools/.
[183] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.29.1.
[184] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.93.2.
[185] Cf. Gilles Emery, 'The Dignity of Being a Substance: Person, Subsistence, and Nature', *Nova et Vetera* 9, no. 4 (2011): 995–96.
[186] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.83.1.

animals since they may be perceived to lack the ability to communicate or control themselves and as a result, they are treated as less than human. For example, Peter Singer, in arguing for the rights of animals, writes that "A chimpanzee, dog, or pig, for instance, will have a higher degree of self-awareness and a greater capacity for meaningful relations with others than a severely retarded infant or someone in a state of advanced senility."[187] The focus of this kind of approach is on capacities, which are often viewed as the measure of one's worth.

While Aquinas sees rationality as the basis of personhood, this does not mean that it must be apparent in order to ascribe it. Emery notes that "Free action is the clearest manifestation of such a rational nature, insofar as action follows upon being."[188] Rationality ultimately belongs to human nature, even if it is not visibly apparent. The capacity to reason may be thwarted but it is not obliterated. Miguel J. Romero observes that Aquinas's approach means that having an intellectual disability does not imply that one is not human.[189] Humanity is not grounded in one's intellect, it is determined by having human parents.[190] Hans Reinders has criticised this approach, arguing that the issue is not about origin but of teleology. People are not expected to be perfect from the beginning but to be moving towards the end.[191] For Aquinas, the final end is union with God, which gives direction to the development of human rational and moral capacities. Reason directs the human person towards achieving their ends and if someone has an intellectual disability, they may face a greater challenge when it comes to identifying what actions are needed to achieve an end, to act or to understand abstract knowledge. Where intellectual disability affects one's ability to identify or pursue immediate ends, this teleological framework risks portraying disabled individuals as impeded in their movement towards their ultimate end.

This tension becomes clearer when considering the role of grace. While Aquinas affirms that all of humanity possesses a rational nature, his teleological account of development risks construing disability as a deviation from the ideal trajectory. Grace might appear to be the answer to the challenge of whether disabled people are at a disadvantage in achieving their telos. Everyone needs grace to achieve their ultimate end. One does not work alone but is reliant on God. All motion is understood by Aquinas as being explained by the Unmoved Mover as

[187] Peter Singer, *Animal Liberation: The Definitive Classic of the Animal Movement*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Open Road, 2015), 53.
[188] Emery, 'The Dignity of Being a Substance', 996.
[189] Cf. Romero, 'Aquinas on the Corporis Infirmitas', 105.
[190] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.98.1; 1.100.1.
[191] Cf. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*, 103.

first cause.[192] Furthermore, God grants humanity power and grace to move towards their ends.[193] Although the need for grace is universal in Aquinas's account, it can be interpreted in ways that reinforce the idea that disability represents a lack to be remedied. The difficulty is not the concept of grace, but how it could be understood as a way of "fixing" the disabled person. Human nature is finite and reliant on God in general, but the difficulty is that for the disabled person, there is an identified lack or deficit which is seen to need mending. As already noted, rationality is not thought to be gone, it does not need to be shown to be understood to exist in an individual. The issue is that people with intellectual disabilities can be thought of as being particularly disadvantaged; their ability to progress, to build habits, and become virtuous will either be doubted or seen to be fixed by God. One must avoid suggesting that God is curing the disabled person, that he is helping them overcome the disability. This requires finding a way to articulate the relationship between God and the disabled person without implying that God is filling in a lack. This will be one of the themes of the final chapter. While there is nothing wrong with seeking union with God as the *telos* of every human life, there is a need for greater care surrounding how the temporal dimension might impact people with intellectual disabilities. After all, as discussed in Chapter One (pp.14-15), expectations about what should happen in time create the sense of disabled people as being burdens.

One might respond that teleology for Aquinas is different from human expectations as the movement towards ends comes from one's nature. It is not an external force on the person. However, it is difficult to fully divorce expectations from teleology, given its focus on movement towards ends. This temporal dimension is a challenge and therefore it is necessary to consider some of the critiques and analysis of time by disability theorists. Disability has been shaped by ideas of time, particularly, how the individual's life span is conceptualised. An individual's life is usually envisioned as a series of different phases which have a variety of cultural markers to identify them, such as childhood, school, getting a job, moving out, getting married, having children and grandchildren. Alison Kafer describes this view as "straight time" where there is "a firm delineation between past/present/future or an expectation of linear development from dependent childhood to independent reproductive adulthood".[194] With its normative assumptions, straight time excludes many people including disabled people. While many people with disabilities do experience these cultural markers albeit sometimes at a different pace than the norm, it cannot be denied that there are those who have greater support needs who may not experience all these markers of personal progress. Harmful judgments can

[192] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.105.5.
[193] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.109.6.
[194] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 51.

emerge as a result, which see disabled people as burdens or in a constant state of childhood. As a response the concept of crip time emerged to challenge the predominant linear and progressive understanding of time. On one level, crip time refers to disabled people's need for more time; on a deeper level, Kafer calls it "a reorientation to time" and "requires reimagining our notions of what can and should happen in time".[195] Looking to the future is not necessarily problematic as it can lead to reflection about the world that one wants and how to get there. However, as Kafer observes, it can be "curative," imagining disabled people as no longer disabled and therefore, becoming normal and becoming a sign of progress.[196]

For Aquinas, the ideal human life involves one moving towards God and growing in virtue. While many people's journeys differ from this ideal, there is a need to move away from this teleological framework because it risks viewing people with disabilities as facing the obstacle of their physical makeup. One response would be to emphasise that there are many paths to God and to make clear that it is personal to the individual. There is no uniform method. At the same time, the difficulty is that the teleological framework has normative assumptions about how human nature should be and many people with disabilities can only belong through the use of caveats, such as rationality is present even if not apparent. Nothing in Aquinas's approach to teleology prevents people with cognitive disabilities from being understood as behind, having greater obstacles or as a major deviation from the norm. Aquinas's focus is not on human achievement, but on being in union with God as the ultimate end. However, that linear perspective of time concentrates on progression and therefore, it is necessary to consider whether there is a need to have different conceptions of time so that the focus is not simply on achieving goals.

This can be seen in Adam Davidson's reflections on his experience of caring for his disabled son, where he identifies with the concept crip time because some of his son's needs, like eating baby food, give the sense of prolonged childhood or stasis. Like many parents of disabled children, Davidson confronts the expectations that one has for one's child, the assumption that a child's life should follow a trajectory of progress. Rather than focusing on productivity or progress, he reflects on the importance of being present. He writes that "presence is relational time, person to person, not person to the cultural expectations."[197] It is

[195] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 26–27.
[196] Cf. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 27–28.
[197] Adam Davidson, 'Stasis-Maintenance-(Un)Productive-Presence: Parenting a Disabled Child as Crip Time', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 40, no. 3 (2020), https://dsq-sds.org/article/id/904/.

about paying attention to Davidson's son and not to what he does. The focus becomes about being with one another and letting his son shape how they spend their time together. This is not a complete rejection of future, but Davidson asks one to reconsider how future is to be imagined.[198] His observations draw one's attention to the need to recognise and affirm the person that exists as they are now rather than on future expectations. Existence and value are not solely based at the end. Aquinas would not deny the value of the human person in the present, but the teleological framework can obscure the value of the present rather than ends.

The question of how to understand how Aquinas might view cognitive abilities requires a closer examination of how the form and matter relate to each other, with particular attention to the matter. It is by being material that individuals are individuated, and differences between individuals arise from differences in their matter. Aquinas writes that:

> For it is clear that the better the body's disposition, the better a soul it receives. This is clearly apparent in things that differ in species. The reason for it is that actuality and form are received in matter with the capacity of the matter. So since, even among human beings, some bodies are better disposed, they receive a soul that has a greater power for intellective cognition.[199]

Aquinas's description of bodies having "better dispositions" is referring to their cognitive abilities. His explanation is that the soul is limited by its body and that this limitation differs from person to person.[200] There is a recognition that the mind is impacted by the body. Aquinas recognises that the materiality of one's body is not irrelevant to the question of cognition, though Aquinas does not view the intellect's powers as being completely material.[201] Pasnau suggests that the modern interpretation of Aquinas would be to say that matter is equivalent to one's inherited biology in how it impacts people's cognition.[202] There is no need to subscribe to biological determinism to say that one's biology impacts an individual. In the passage above, Aquinas refers to both better bodies and souls, but the emphasis is on the quality of the matter rather than souls. The quality of the matter, unlike the soul, is a matter of luck. Intellectual disabilities could be understood as a particular relationship between the body and the soul. While Aquinas's views seem to be promising from the perspective of disability as there is an

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[198] Cf. Davidson, 'Stasis-Maintenance-(Un)Productive-Presence'.
[199] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.85.7.
[200] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, 'Commentary on the Sentences', trans. Christopher Decaen and Beth Mortensen, 11 February 2023, 8.5.2, https://aquinas.cc/la/en/~Sent.I.
[201] According to Aquinas, the intellect's ability to recognise and understand universal concepts is not the power of an organ, like the brain. By recognising universals, one is engaging in a non-material act because one is abstracting these universals from creation. Cf. Aquinas, 'Commentary on the Sentences', 19.1.1.
[202] Cf. Robert Pasnau, *Thomas Aquinas on Human Nature: A Philosophical Study of Summa Theologiae Ia 75-89* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 117.

acknowledgment of how the makeup impacts the body, the problem is that ideally, the human body would not be suffering from defects.

As previously mentioned, Aquinas rejects the idea that the soul drives the body like a ship. However, his claim that the soul's operations can be impeded by the body risks suggesting that the body is like a ship to the soul albeit a flawed one that is impacting the soul from achieving its aims. Therefore, it is necessary to approach the relationship differently, where the limitations are recognised as being natural. One's physical makeup has an impact on what one can do, and Aquinas is right to recognise this. The difficulty arises not in this recognition, but in the judgment placed on what one can or cannot do, rather than the acceptance of difference. Aquinas understands the human person as finite but one must go further to make clear that disability does not necessarily mean that one's agency is being let down by the matter. In this regard, Deborah Creamer's differentiation between having limits and being limited is a useful alternative. Being limited emphasises what one is unable to do whereas limits are about what is possible and highlights that no one can do everything. The boundaries of what is possible are fluid, but those limits are real.[203] Making explicit that there are limits to human agency helps to ensure that people with disabilities are not seen as an Other. The limits differ from person to person, but it helps to remove the prevalent assumption that something has gone wrong. Aquinas by arguing that agency and intellect are to be assumed in the human person was a promising starting point but in viewing people with disabilities as being thwarted, it suggests that people have currently unmet potential which they are not currently living up to. It continues to treat people with disabilities as being a deviation from the ideal. It is for this reason that it is necessary to consider Aquinas's understanding of Original Sin and how it relates to the creation of defects.

2.1.3. The Possibility of Prelapsarian Disabilities

To answer the question of how disability can be understood in Aquinas's anthropology, it is necessary to consider how he viewed humanity in the beginning. This is not only important for understanding his theological anthropology but also because of how it shapes his understanding of Christ's humanity and mission. Before the Fall, according to Aquinas, humans existed in a state of Original Justice, where the world existed in harmony. Human corruptibility is not a result of humanity's substantial form but is a consequence of sin. Prior to the Fall, Aquinas

[203] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 93–94.

understands Adam's body as being "indissoluble not by reason of any intrinsic vigor of immortality, but by reason of a supernatural force given by God to the soul, whereby it was enabled to preserve the body from all corruption so long as it remained itself subject to God."[204] In this original state, the whole body was subject to the soul which meant that Adam could avoid harm at will.[205] According to Aquinas, human nature can exist in different states. Prelapsarian or unfallen human nature is subject completely to God's grace whereas fallen human nature is no longer subject to divine grace. The difference between these two natures has an impact on the body.

One problem, from a contemporary perspective, is Aquinas's literal reading of the story of Adam and Eve. This gives greater ontological weight to the prelapsarian condition, since it is treated as a real historical state rather than a symbolic one. A shared concern between Aquinas and modern theologians, however, is how this narrative shapes accounts of human origins. It matters how the story is interpreted. A difficulty arises in imagining a state of perfect harmony prior to the Fall, which is the temptation to identify parts of the world as showing the disorder and disharmony. As Dawn DeVries observes, the idea that there was a state of "original uniformity" has been used in arguments to explain why social and cultural instability is understood as a problem.[206] While no one can be understood as being like Adam prior to the Fall, under Aquinas's logic, the risk is that some people appear to be closer to that ideal than others. This risks portraying disabled people as icons of the Fall.

It is not necessary to follow Aquinas' interpretation of the creation narratives, which presents Adam as being beyond physical or mental corruption. The need for a different interpretation is not solely due to concerns about disability but because the history of interpretation differs from the text itself. The idea that Adam was perfect is external to the Genesis text. It is a result of reading Genesis 2 through Romans 3:23 where Paul writes that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God". It would eventually be developed into the doctrine of Original Sin by the fifth century.[207] Paul Ricoeur argues attributing any supernatural perfection to Adam reduces the Adamic myth to a fall from perfection which is more gnostic than the original text.[208] Therefore, it is necessary to challenge the idea that the story depicts a

[204] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.97.1.
[205] Cf. Cross, 'Aquinas on Physical Impairment', 325.
[206] Cf. Dawn DeVries, 'Creation, Handicappism, and the Community of Differing Abilities', in *Reconstructing Christian Theology*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Mark Lewis Taylor (Fortress Press, 1994), 129.
[207] Cf. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 161.
[208] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, *The Symbolism of Evil*, trans. Emerson Buchanan (Beacon Press, 1969), 233.

loss of being perfect superhumans. Creamer's statement that limits are "unsurprising" means that they should be found in all humans.[209] Finitude and limits come with being part of creation. Aquinas does not view the non-corruptibility of the prelapsarian Adam as being absolute, it is because of the favour of God. The question remains is whether it is necessary to retain the idea that the human person was non-corruptible prior to the Fall or whether the focus should be on the idea of being in union with God? The latter does not require that the focus of the myth being on a Fall from a corruptible perfect state.

Joel D. Estes has questioned the idea that Genesis 2 depicts human perfection and uniformity. He observes that contrary to prevailing notions of the Garden of Eden as being ideal, Adam is lonely and longs for companionship.[210] His body may have seemed whole, but he lacked something crucial which was communion with others. While Estes does not interpret the text literally, he observes that the creation of Eve resembles a surgical act, since God removes Adam's rib. Estes writes that "on a symbolic level God's action entails a removal from Adam's body. In order to make Eve, Adam's body experiences loss."[211] Although this is not a disability, nevertheless it questions the way in which one imagines the ideal human. Society envisions the perfect person as "powerful, independent, unblemished, and self-sufficient—supremely *able*."[212] These are precisely the values that must be challenged from the perspective of disability. Even Adam is portrayed needy, he cannot solve his own problems but depends on God and Eve. This contrasts with Aquinas who rejects the possibility that the removal of Adam's rib as suggesting that his body became blemished. It is not interpreted as a loss, rather Aquinas likens it to semen and therefore, it is seen as natural and pleasurable for it to be "released".[213] This approach eliminates any suggestion of Adam being wounded or vulnerable. The creation of Eve is not because of any needs that Adam has, but solely for his pleasure.

Aquinas's account of prelapsarian nature presents two challenges: its refusal to recognise Adam's vulnerability and its limited conception of human diversity. The question of diversity matters because it reveals the variety of people who can be envisioned as being part of God's original design. Aquinas discusses the state of original innocence to humanity in general,

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[209] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 31.
[210] Cf. Joel D. Estes, 'Imperfection in Paradise: Reading Genesis 2 through the Lens of Disability and a Theology of Limits', *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 38, no. 1 (2016): 13.
[211] Estes, 'Imperfection in Paradise', 14.
[212] Estes, 'Imperfection in Paradise', 14. Emphasis in original.
[213] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.92.3.

not just specific persons. Answering the question of whether all people are equal in the state of innocence, he writes that:

> …*some would have been born more robust in body than others*, and also greater, and more beautiful, and all ways better disposed; so that, however, in those who were thus surpassed, *there would have been no defect or fault either in soul or body.*[214]

Aquinas fails to recognise that to have bodies that are more robust than others would seem to require an idea of bodily vulnerability. Nevertheless, this quote provides the possibility to understand disability not as a lack but allow for it to be part of natural variation. Elsewhere, Aquinas describes "The whole universe in its wholeness more perfectly shares in and represents the divine goodness than any one creature by itself."[215] While this quote is about the diversity of creation, it can also refer to the diversity of humanity. As I will argue in the final chapter, it is necessary that one does not exclude people with disabilities from reflecting God. For this to be possible, it must be recognised that disability is not simply a lack or a defect but can also be a facet of created diversity.

2.2. Jürgen Moltmann and an Anthropology of Becoming

2.2.1. Being a Body

Moltmann's treatment of the body is sporadic, with his most extended discussion in *God in Creation.* A consistent theme throughout his career is his concern that theology's embrace of dualisms has led to the world being treated as inferior.[216] Accordingly, Moltmann rejects a dualistic concept of the body, which emphasises the spiritual aspect of the human person over and against the body. However, this does not prevent him from having a concept of the spirit, which, like Aquinas, is understood to be a "comprehensive organizational principle". [217] The spirit is not limited to consciousness or reason; rather "it comprehends the whole unified structure of his body and his soul."[218] The spirit or soul is the "animating principle," which Moltmann says is synonymous with life.[219] His reasoning is very different to Aquinas, as it relies on the two creation narratives in Genesis. He grounds this in Genesis 2:7, which does not describe the human person as being created by placing a soul in the flesh; rather the human

[214] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.96.3. Emphasis added.
[215] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.47.1.
[216] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *God in Creation: A New Theology of Creation and the Spirit of God*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Fortress Press, 1993), 247.
[217] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 18.
[218] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 18.
[219] Jürgen Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life: On Dying and Rising*, trans. Ellen Yutzy Glebe (Fortress Press, 2020), ch. 4.

person is created holistically. He observes that Genesis describes one becoming "a living soul" (Gen. 2:7 AV) or an animated body. From this, he concludes that one does not *have* a soul but *is* a soul.[220] Furthermore, God breathing into man's nostrils is interpreted by Moltmann as a sign that humanity and most animals are dependent on air.[221] This indicates creation's finitude and interdependence, rejecting any suggestion of the atomised self. Just as it is wrong to say that one has a soul, it is also wrong, according to Moltmann, to claim that one has a body. He claims that the Hebrew Bible does not divide the human person into body and soul, rather it tends to treat the human person as a whole, without speculating about the essence of humanity or its parts.[222]

Adopting this understanding of the human person can be seen to challenge the hierarchical logic embedded in dualisms, which, as previously noted (p.17), can treat disabled people as inferior. Moltmann identifies a connection between Augustine's concept of *imago Dei,* which understands the body as being dominated by the soul, and the idea that God dominates the world. Both positions are read by Moltmann as making sovereignty the defining feature of both God and the *imago Dei*.[223] He rejects Augustine's position for two reasons. Firstly, Augustine's account of *imago Dei* emphasises God as one essential sovereign being rather than as three Triune Persons.[224] Moltmann argues that *imago Dei* is a trinitarian concept. Being made in God's likeness is not primarily a characteristic but it is found through fellowship with others. It requires building a community.[225] This frames human life as one of sharing rather than domination.

Secondly, Moltmann critiques Augustine's conception of imago Dei, and similar accounts, for maligning the human body. By treating the body as secondary to *imago Dei,* Augustine overlooks the transformative significance of the incarnation. Moltmann views the incarnation as meaning that "the human becomes God's image 'in body as in soul'."[226] Furthermore, the body is to be "a temple of the Holy Spirit" (1 Cor. 6:13ff) which Moltmann interprets as meaning that the body and soul are treated as a whole and that the body cannot be inferior to the spirit.[227] If *imago Dei* is treated as non-bodily, Moltmann notes, sexual difference

[220] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 256.
[221] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 187.
[222] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 257.
[223] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 236.
[224] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 237.
[225] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 155–56.
[226] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 240.
[227] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 239.

cannot be asserted as being part of *imago Dei.* This is not the case, if one claims as Moltmann does, that it refers to the human being "in his whole existence - which means in his bodily nature too".[228] This line of thought can be extended to people with disabilities, thereby challenging dominant narratives about disability.

Moltmann is critical of the idea that one possesses a body because it comes from a desire to control bodies. He argues modern industrial societies treat the human body as an object that is to be mastered. Drawing on Marxist theory, he argues that humans have been alienated from nature, including their own bodies. They are compelled to respond to capitalism's demands, rather than their own bodies, to function as workers. Such a society values the ability to control oneself, including one's own needs and feelings, and he argues that one only becomes aware of this situation after becoming ill.[229] There is no space or time given to attend to the body. While acknowledging its important contributions, he observes that modern science tends to treat the human person as an object.[230] According to Moltmann, this is an epistemological mistake. While the human person can create some distance from one's bodily existence to treat the body as an object, one cannot truly make oneself solely an object. In medicine, he points out that a sick person is always a person, regardless of how one is treated.[231] According to Moltmann, a person both *has* a body and *is* a body. The problem that he identifies in science and in society is the suppression of *being* a body, which needs to be rediscovered.[232] From a young age, he argues, societies enforce the idea that identity is based upon one's achievements and labour. Even during one's leisure time, one is expected to "do something".[233] Influenced by John Calvin, Moltmann argues that God did not create with a fixed instrumental target or functional end in mind, in the sense of a pre-given outcome that determines or exhausts creation's meaning; rather, *creatio ex nihilo* rejects any sense that humans are created for a purpose like divine self-realisation.[234] This rejection of determinism and fixed natures by Moltmann does not entail the absence of purpose, but rather a rejection of purpose understood as a pre-given functional role that exhausts human meaning. Human existence is instead oriented toward an open-ended relational and eschatological fulfilment, rather than defined by a static role. Human existence is understood to be "justified and made beautiful before we are able to do or fail to do anything."[235] He argues that they are made for

[228] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 240.
[229] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 48.
[230] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 51.
[231] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 48.
[232] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 51–52.
[233] Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, trans. Reinhard Ulrich (Harper & Row, 1972), 7–9.
[234] Cf. Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 18–20.
[235] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 21.

joy, not a functional end.[236] Moltmann recognises that in societies focused on achievement, disabled people are marginalised for being perceived as weak.[237]

From a disability perspective, the idea that human existence is justified prior to any action has potential to challenge ableist assumptions, because the focus on action has led to defining individuals by what they do, rather than recognising the value of the person as they are. As previously mentioned, demonstrations of human agency as the basis of personhood can lead to the questioning of the personhood of people with disabilities. If humans are not created for any purpose, except for the delight of God, it potentially frees humanity from the expectation that they must prove their worth. As Moltmann writes people are told to "Be good for something or you are good for nothing," which means that life centres on being useful rather than enjoying creation.[238] The purposelessness of creation affirms the inherent dignity of humanity and calls into question what one expects to happen in time. It is a rejection of usefulness. The discussion of crip time shows that the temporal expectations not only alienates disabled people because they are seen as burdens who do not progress, but also because it can mean missing the gift of the present. What Moltmann's interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* highlights is that there a sense of goodness in being. It allows one to view material creation without the expectation that it is something to escape from or that its limits are to be rejected. There is a dependency at the heart of creation, and it is good. However, the question that emerges is how this interpretation of *creatio ex nihilo* in *Theology of Play* aligns with Moltmann's broader thought, specifically his social understanding of the human person, his eschatological focus, and the tragic dimension within his doctrine of creation.

2.2.2. Eschatological Anthropology

Humanity, according to Moltmann, does not possess an essence or a fixed definition. As he asserts, "Being human means becoming human".[239] In *Man,* when comparing humanity to the rest of animals, he observes that humanity has "an incomplete nature".[240] Other animals have a complete nature, he explains, meaning that they instinctively know what they must do, whereas

[236] Cf. Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 19.
[237] Cf. Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 113.
[238] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 19.
[239] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 227.
[240] Jürgen Moltmann, *Man: Christian Anthropology in the Conflicts of the Present*, trans. John Sturdy (SPCK, 1974), 5.

humans must discover what their nature is.[241] He argues that the Bible does not provide a definitive answer to the question "what is humanity?" Instead, the question is repeatedly posed, which Moltmann interprets as meaning that "man must answer with his whole life and yet cannot."[242] This expresses Moltmann's eschatological perspective: history is open and incomplete and therefore it cannot be defined. While humans cannot see their entire life, God can. At the eschaton, Moltmann argues that humanity will also be able to gather up the fragments of their lives, including the parts of one's life that are currently forgotten.[243] For Moltmann, it is insufficient to speak of the human person as body and soul; to speak of the whole of the human person, one must include the person's history. This means that even if one is not disabled from birth but becomes disabled later in life, both periods of one's life can be understood to contribute to one's identity. He uses the concept *Gestalt,* which comes from psychology, and is defined by Moltmann as meaning "the configuration or total pattern - of the lived life."[244] Personhood, therefore, is "nothing other than the continuity of the human being in the transmutations of his temporal Gestalt and the different phases of his development."[245]

Moltmann's view that human history forms the human person ensures that personhood is not an abstract concept but is grounded in human life. The human person is shaped by multiple dimensions, such as genetics, environment, culture, and society. However, a person is not just a product of external influences. Moltmann identifies "inward structures," which he describes as "body and soul, the conscious and the unconscious, the centre and the periphery."[246] These internal and external structures are differentiated, but they also interpenetrate each other, and there is an exchange between them. The relationship between body and soul is described as being in dialogue, with each possessing their own language, but neither should dominate the conversation and silence the other.[247] He describes the relationship between body and soul as a type of community, a *perichoresis*.[248] This framing reflects Moltmann's critique of monotheism which encourages hierarchies in society. For Moltmann, *perichoresis,* mutual indwelling, is intended as a paradigm at every level of existence.

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[241] Cf. Moltmann, *Man*, 5.
[242] Moltmann, *Man*, 13–14.
[243] Cf. Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life*, ch. 4.
[244] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 259.
[245] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 267-8.
[246] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 259.
[247] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 260.
[248] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 240.

According to Moltmann, the desire to be whole cannot be fulfilled in this life, but at the eschaton. He describes this desire for wholeness as "a *cry for help,*" reflecting people's social lives, where they are a different person for each relationship.[249] The various expectations placed on people force them into a variety of roles and producing a feeling that one lacks a unified self. At best, one can only have fleeting moments of being whole, when people feel that things are "as it should be" and that they are "'completely there'".[250] Such moments are anticipatory. They leave one unsatisfied but continuing to hunger for the eschaton. The true self cannot be grasped because it is never at one's own disposal. The separation necessary to get that kind of perspective is not achievable. Possessing that self-knowledge would mean that one is no longer human because Moltmann argues the human person would be "finished".[251] It would mean that everything about the human person would be tied down and no longer an open question. Human nature is not predetermined, rather it unfolds over the cross of one's life.[252]

Moltmann's approach to nature ensures that nothing is excluded from human nature, avoiding any suggestion that anything is contrary to human nature. There is realism in such an approach, rather than approaching it with a focus on the ideal form of humanity. While Aquinas does have a concept of human nature without sin as well as a definition of the human person, it is not so defined that it attempts to explain the whole human nature. As explored earlier in this chapter, Aquinas argues that there is a human essence, but the particularities are understood to be accidents that flow from the nature. For the purpose of this project, Moltmann's approach is critical because it allows for a greater acceptance of disability, rather than viewing it through the lens of *privatio boni*. It allows it to be a part of human nature without construing disability as a privation of proper humanity. Human nature cannot be defined from within an unfinished historical existence. This does not prevent discussion of an ideal humanity from the perspective of ethics, but without creating a normative view of human embodiment.

At first glance, Moltmann's claim that the human person is incomplete might appear to contradict his interpretation of creation as purposeless. By purposelessness, Moltmann does not mean that creation lacks meaning or eschatological orientation. Rather, he rejects the idea that humans are static with a predetermined role or have a fixed instrumental function. Moltmann

[249] Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life*, ch. 4. Emphasis in original.
[250] Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life*, ch. 4.
[251] Moltmann, *Man*, 2.
[252] Cf. Moltmann, *Resurrected to Eternal Life*, ch. 4.

views the future as open, and therefore, creation's purposelessness allows for spontaneity.[253] It is part of the freedom of creation, and a foretaste of the new creation. Moltmann values play because in play one engages "with alternatives to normal life".[254] Spontaneity is understood as a form of resistance to the order maintained by repressive societies.[255] Thus, there is no contradiction between incompleteness and purposelessness: both emphasise openness and freedom rather than a fixed closure in the present. It points to the possibility that things can be otherwise. However, the challenge is whether Moltmann's eschatological framework overshadows his initial insight into the intrinsic goodness of human existence.

This account of fragmented and eschatologically deferred selfhood requires a distinction between personhood and identity in order to preserve human dignity apart from recognition or performance. Moltmann's eschatological framing of personhood means that it is only at the end that one knows oneself. The concept encompasses the full scope of the person, including all of one's history, attributes, and even the forgotten fragments of one's life. While Moltmann is responding to an undervaluing of history, there is a need for care, particularly for this project which focuses on disability. It is necessary to develop an understanding of personhood that does not rely on their attributes, actions or history, given its implications for people with disabilities. As previously discussed, for people with intellectual disabilities, personality, ability, and action are often doubted. What is required is an ethical concept that ensures one's dignity, irrespective of completion or performance.

In many ways, Moltmann's approach aligns with some of the concerns over identity in postmodernity. Identity is not understood as fixed, but as fragmented and continually in process. One cannot expect continuity or totality.[256] Moltmann offers a response to this fragmentation by locating the unity of the self eschatologically. However, this framework is better understood as

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[253] There are questions that can be asked of whether Moltmann commits to this view fully given his view that God is also coming from the future as this suggests that the future is not as open as imagined. However, this question goes beyond the parameters of this dissertation.
[254] Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 9.
[255] Cf. Moltmann, *Theology of Play*, 11.
[256] Cf. Zygmunt Bauman, 'From Pilgrim to Tourist- or a Short History of Identity', in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay (SAGE Publications, 2011), 18–19; 25; 34; cf. Zygmunt Bauman, 'Identity - Then, Now, What For?', *Polish Sociological Review* 3, no. 123 (1998): 206–8. Theorists point to a variety of contributing factors to the problem of identity and its stability. Globalization, with the increase of people moving internationally and being part of many different communities, means that a sense of belonging becomes difficult. Another factor in the instability of identity is that one is expected to keep one's options open. As a result, there can be a hesitancy or suspicion of long-term commitments because of the instability of one's identity and therefore, there is the expectation that one should not attempt to seek stability. One's life is viewed as episodic rather than as one long pilgrimage.

referring to identity than personhood, allowing personhood to refer to the innate dignity of the human person irrespective of what happens in one's life. Therefore, history and personality are better understood as aspects of identity. Moltmann does not reject dignity or human rights, but he fails to attend to the goodness of the present.[257] A concept of personhood that is not conflated with identity helps to affirm the person's value now. It ensures one's dignity, irrespective of completion or performance. It is not only the embrace of alternative futures which contribute to challenging oppressive societies, the affirmation of present existence is also needed. For disabled people, in particular, their lives are imagined to be improved by a radically different future, leaving little affirmation of who they are now. The medical model of disability has been criticised because it reduces disability to a problem that needs to be solved and the eschatological framework risks making the same mistake. Its focus on creation's suffering leaves little room to speak of its goodness. The problem is not the claim that human beings are incomplete; rather, disability exposes the need to affirm human dignity in the present without making it dependent upon future completion. The tension between relational accounts of the self and the need to ground human dignity apart from recognition or performance will be examined further in Chapter Five.

Viewing human personhood as being in constant development means that there is no fixed concept of what it means to be human, which can resist any suggestion that people with disabilities are in any way deficient. No one can be regarded as whole at this point in history, and therefore, no one can be used as a comparison point. This is particularly evident in Moltmann's view that the human person on this side of the eschaton is only possessing fragments. The transient nature of creation means that there is nothing that one can hold onto. This approach might suggest continual growth as one is in a constant state of coming to be. Yet this raises the question of whether disabled people are recognised as participating in that process. Much of the language used to describe disabled people has a temporal dimension, terms such as "backwards" or "slow" reveal how disability is often framed as temporal delay.[258] They portray disabled people as behind the norm. However, there can be a failure to recognise an individual's progress, which is not the same as saying that there is no progress. At the same time, the question is to what extent one should emphasise progress at all. A focus on human progress has the potential to reintroduce the idea that one's value depends on one's actions. Moltmann's eschatological framework, however, differs from the modern belief in progress. His emphasis on spontaneity helps resist this danger, since spontaneity involves action without

[257] For more on Moltmann's approach to human rights cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *On Human Dignity: Political Theology and Ethics*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (SCM Press, 1984), 23–32.
[258] Cf. Baynton, '"These Pushful Days":', 52.

premeditation, particularly as the eschaton is understood to be God's spontaneous act. It challenges not only the existing social order, but also the imagined orders that one is striving for.

The eschatological framing of Moltmann's theology has certain limitations, particularly in its emphasis on creation's need for contradiction rather than on the goodness of creation itself. Moltmann's approach to creation differs from Aquinas in that he does not interpret human suffering as being solely a consequence of the Fall.[259] He writes that "The experience of suffering goes far beyond the experience of guilt and the experience of grace. It has roots in the limitations of created reality itself."[260] For Moltmann, the fact that creation is limited means that pain and death are a consequence of how the world has been created. It is the limits that cause sin rather than the other way round.[261] This understanding underpins Moltmann's engagement to evolutionary science. By presenting a cosmology that emphasises continuous development, he articulates a theology consistent with evolution.[262] Moltmann recognises that in bringing theology and evolutionary science together, it is necessary to confront the pain and suffering intrinsic to the evolutionary process. Critiquing Teilhard, he writes "Evolution always means *selection.* Many living things are sacrificed in order that 'the fittest' - which means the most effective and the most adaptable – may survive. …Evolution is not merely a constructive affair on nature's part. It is a cruel one too."[263] There is an honesty in Moltmann's treatment of creation because it does not seek to assign blame or romanticise the evolutionary process. Instead, he acknowledges the pain as intrinsic to the finite nature of creation.

Moltmann's theology of creation acknowledges that the limits of creation are painful without implying that they are a punishment for sin. There is no imagined time in which humans are perfect and therefore, there is no idealised point for comparison. Unlike Aquinas, Moltmann does not suggest that nature has been thwarted; creation is envisioned as open and without a predetermined direction. Therefore, disability is not a defect or privation, rather it can be regarded as part of the diversity that evolution has produced. At the same time, one is left with a sense of unease with how to interpret the status of creation. His position means that

[259] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life: A Universal Affirmation*, trans. Margaret Kohl (SCM Press, 1992), 125–28.
[260] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 51.
[261] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Coming of God: Christian Eschatology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Fortress Press, 1996), 91.
[262] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 209.
[263] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ: Christology in Messianic Dimensions*, trans. Margaret Kohl (SCM Press, 1990), 294. Emphasis in original.

creation, from the very beginning, is oriented toward redemption. The problem is that God has created a world that is cruel, which makes it difficult to speak of the goodness of the world. From the beginning, there is a need to overcome the limits, for redemption. Moltmann's theology encourages a forward-looking posture rather than acknowledging the goodness of creation presently. It risks undercutting the world's intrinsic value. Moreover, the theodicy question is now part of the very existence of creation because of the suffering inherent in evolution. This means that in the act of creation God needs to justify himself. From the beginning, there is a dialogical aspect to creation. The creation narratives, though not literal accounts, invite one to understand creation as good even in its imperfection; they affirm the integrity of the present world. From a disability hermeneutic, it is necessary to resist the eschatological framing to affirm people with disabilities now.

2.2.3. Questioning Ideas of Health and Disability

Unlike Aquinas, Moltmann addresses disability directly, along with the question of how to understand health, in several places throughout his career. He observes that the meaning of health is culturally and historically situated, with a variety of definitions. Moltmann argues that what is contained and implied in the definitions may not actually be healthy. He cites the example of the WHO definition of health as "a state of complete physical, mental and social well-being, not merely the absence of sickness and handicaps." Moltmann argues that one of the problems with this definition is that it is "a maximum definition." It is utopian, imagining a state with no bodily or mental suffering.[264] Similarly, Moltmann-Wendel observes that this definition "fails to do justice to the human body, which is never perfect, which ages, becomes sick, is part of society".[265] The definition contains unachievable normative assumptions, Moltmann observes, portraying bodily impairments as something that damages one's personhood. In what Moltmann calls "health A," health is envisioned as an objective state of wellbeing that one could achieve. It is understood as "the absence of malfunctionings". By contrast, "health B" focuses on one's attitude amid continual change. It refers to the "strength" to adapt and to keep going even when one becomes ill, as one ages or if there are other bodily changes in other ways. This ability to cope, Moltmann argues, is "'the strength to be human'". It is necessary to say that human life has meaning in both "health *and* sickness, and ultimately living *and* dying," because the meaning of human life is not to be healthy. If health is given the

[264] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 270–72.
[265] Moltmann-Wendel, *I Am My Body*, 23.

highest value, it will result in oppression as people lose their rights over their own bodies.[266] Moltmann's critical analysis of health is significant because it challenges deficit-focused approaches. The mutability of the human person makes "health A" unattainable, and yet life must still be affirmed as meaningful.

In advocating for "health B," Moltmann argues that illness is about more than the functioning of particular body parts. Able-bodiedness is not treated as the norm or ideal. This approach allows illness to be considered from a multi-dimensional standpoint. Moltmann identifies four dimensions through which to understand its impact. The first concerns the individual and their own self-understanding. The impact of illness forces the individual to re-imagine who they are.[267] This can be either a recognition of one's mortality or an adjustment to new limits. Writing about disability specifically, Moltmann argues "that liberation of oneself comes before mutual liberation."[268] Before mutual liberation can be realised, Moltmann recognises a need for self-acceptance. The ability to protest is a sign that one has not given up.[269] There is a recognition of one's own worth that is needed first. The second dimension concerns social relationships. Illness can change the dynamics of one's relationships, requiring others to adapt to the changes. One does not have to deal only with one's own expectations of what one can do but also the expectations of others. The third aspect is the impact on one's life history as the illness can result in a sense of conflict between what the individual is experiencing and what they were striving and hoping for. Moltmann describes this experience as a "foretaste of death." Finally, illness can impact people in "the transcendent sphere," where the suffering that comes with disability provokes questions about the meaning of one's life and can result in "crises of basic trust."[270]

Moltmann's treatment of disability aligns in significant ways with the social model of disability. He quotes the protest of people with disabilities who have declared, "'It is not we who are your problem – it is you that are ours'".[271] This emphasis on locating the problem in social relations resonates with Moltmann's account of sin. He argues that the "real history of human sin" starts with Cain's fratricide, whereas story of Adam and Eve is myth, thereby shifting the focus to sin as violence and injustice, which can be obscured in discussions of the

[266] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 270–73. Emphasis in original.
[267] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 274.
[268] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 106.
[269] Cf. Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 108.
[270] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 274–75.
[271] Jürgen Moltmann, *A Broad Place: An Autobiography*, trans. Margaret Kohl (SCM Press, 2007), 207–8.

universality of sin.[272] He lists a wide variety of conflicts and argues that "it is always a question of power."[273] While he recognises greater complexities, at its core the problem is the monopolisation of resources and power by a few, which creates a binary between groups. He includes disabled people in this account, writing that "it is the healthy who handicap the handicapped".[274] Societies are recognised as creating disabled people.

This emphasis on power being monopolised by an elite can be critiqued, since in the case of disability the problem is often the marginalisation of a minority by mainstream society. However, in his writings specifically focused on disability rather than sin, this dynamic is more clearly acknowledged. Moltmann contends that there are no "people with disabilities," only people, and that the very category of disability emerged from a judgement made by a "society of strong and capable". He argues that people with disabilities are being portrayed as problems, instead of equals.[275] In using the word disability, he argues, one is using the standard of the perfect and strong.[276] He observes that in a sense everyone is disabled, writing that:

> There is no differentiation between the healthy and those with disabilities. For every human life has its limitations, vulnerabilities, and weaknesses. We are born needy, and we die helpless. So in truth there is no such life without disabilities. It is only the ideals of health of a society of the strong which condemn a part of humanity to being "disabled."[277]

This understanding follows naturally from Moltmann's vision of health, since everyone must find the strength to cope with the challenges that occur in one's life. The problem, he argues, is that disabled people are othered with little recognition of the fact that all are finite beings. Moltmann notes that there is a pervasive fear of disability, which leads to exclusion or mere toleration, instead of being welcomed.[278] Exclusion from public life, he observes, reinforces this fear. Encountering disabled people can create uncertainty about what it means to be human and their own futures, which can lead to people becoming intolerant to people with disabilities because of that fear.[279] Yet, Moltmann insists that "Every disability is also a gift," understood as a gift of the Holy Spirit through which each person has something to offer others.[280]

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[272] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 125–26.
[273] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 125.
[274] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 125.
[275] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 105.
[276] Cf. Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 207–8.
[277] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 110.
[278] Cf. Moltmann, *A Broad Place*, 207.
[279] Cf. Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 113–14.
[280] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 120–21.

Moltmann's claim that all human beings are limited and has the potential to resist treating people with disabilities as Other. It potentially creates a sense of unity rather than reinforcing abnormality. Creamer similarly argues that disability invites a rethinking of human anthropology and advocates for an anthropology of limits. In this framework, disability is no longer understood as a binary distinction but instead "a fluid construction".[281] Susan Wendell observes that emphasising this shared "sameness," allows non-disabled people to identify with disabled people.[282] However, there are reasons to be cautious. Wendell warns that there are those who wish to keep a distinctive identity and not to assimilate into the mainstream culture and values. Highlighting sameness can promote solidarity on an individual level, but it can neglect the structural and social changes needed to challenge ableism.[283] Moreover, if finitude is treated as a continuum, it can reintroduce hierarchy, imagining disability as existing on a single linear spectrum, as is often mistakenly done, for example, with autism. A more accurate image is not a line but a wheel or constellation, where different aspects, such as communication, sensory experience, and mobility, vary across individuals. Recognising this complexity is essential to avoid flattening disability into mere degrees of limitation.

The suggestion that disability is a gift has the potential risks implying that a person's value is based on what they offer others rather than inherent dignity. Rhetorically, the language of gifts can serve as compensation for the disability, which otherwise one would wish to avoid. For example, the stereotypes that people with Down syndrome are always happy or that autistic people are savants could be seen as the gifts that come with those disabilities. Such assumptions treat these groups as monoliths and deny the complexity of their experiences. But critically, it continues to base human worth on performance rather than making dignity innate. However, Moltmann's understanding of gift differs from the idea that it is compensation. As noted earlier, he is critical of societal values that prioritise action over being. Moltmann looks at the gifts of disability because he wants to shift the focus away from what disabled people lack: "on what a person is missing, what he has been deprived of."[284] They have gifts to offer others. Drawing on Paul who says that God has chosen those who the world would call weak or foolish (1 Cor. 1:26), Moltmann likens disability to other gifts of the Spirit, such as being a Jew or a gentile, married or single. For Moltmann, the gift that disability provides is "the precious insight into the woundedness and weakness of human life. But a person with disabilities also gives insight into the humanity of his own world."[285] Moltmann recognises that disabled people are not just

[281] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 31.
[282] Cf. Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 74.
[283] Cf. Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 74–75.
[284] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 120.
[285] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 120–21.

recipients of care but have insights to share. Similarly, Wendell argues that disabled people have a distinctive knowledge, such as how to live in a suffering body and claims that "Much of it would enrich and expand our culture, and some of it has the potential to change our thinking and our ways of life profoundly."[286] But Moltmann's framing of gift as providing insight into woundedness has the potential to retain the association between disability and suffering.

Moltmann cannot be accused of valuing disability for its inspirational potential, in part because of how he understands strength. The gifts do not make the disabled person a supercrip, a figure whose worth lies in defying the expectations of disability.[287] For Moltmann, it is about adaptation to the changes of life. Adaptation requires some degree of acceptance of what is happening, rather than denial or resistance to it. The four dimensions of illness that Moltmann outlines show that one must come to terms with the reality of one's illness or disability. A diagnosis often forces one to reimagine multiple aspects of life and can feel, as Moltmann suggests, like "burying hopes" because it requires relinquishing previous plans and dreams. The emphasis is adaptation rather than treating disability as tragic, while acknowledging the pain. As repeatedly argued, it is necessary to reject the narrative that disability is tragic and to argue that there is still meaning despite the difficulties one faces. Moltmann describes the strength of humanity as being love which is an affirmation of life. For Moltmann, all human life with its frailty is to be "accepted, affirmed and loved life."[288] The challenge for Moltmann is to stay in this present moment and affirm creation and to not portray creation simply as a matter of survival.

Conclusion

The first half of this chapter examined Aquinas's hylomorphism and how disability can be understood within that framework. A key question was whether lifelong disabilities can be viewed as separable or inseparable accidents. While it could be argued that lifelong disabilities are inseparable accidents, similar to biological sex, Aquinas's treatment of blindness shows that at least some disabilities are viewed as a privation of the good that humans ought to possess. Defining disability as a privation makes it difficult to allow the possibility that it could be a positive or neutral aspect of the individual or an inseparable accident but instead keeps it in the

[286] Wendell, *The Rejected Body*, 69.
[287] Cf. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 90.
[288] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 275.

deficit framework. Another challenge of Aquinas's theology is that finitude is distinct from disability. In Aquinas's model, finitude is a part of creation, whereas disability is often treated as a consequence of sin and disorder. This separation means that disability cannot be treated as a normal or expected aspect of human limitation, but instead becomes something requiring explanation, correction, or justification. While disabilities do not, for Aquinas, prevent one from attributing human personhood, this affirmation may not go far enough. Aquinas's teleological perspective frames disability as a deviation from or an obstacle towards one's end and places the focus on continual growth rather than recognising the human person as they are in the present. As a result, there is a need for greater care in how theology uses teleology and what one expects to occur in time.

Aquinas acknowledges that the body affects the soul's intellectual capacities, which could be understood as recognising the limitations that arise from one's genetic makeup. While this might appear to allow for a move away from a moral judgment against limits, he ultimately attributes these limits to the Fall. Where Estes identifies limits and wounding in Adam before the Fall, Aquinas rejects any suggestion that Adam's wound could be viewed as a blemish. There is a repeated refusal to allow for prelapsarian humanity to be vulnerable, even when allowing for a diversity of bodies. The consequence of this view is that the post-Fall relationship between the soul and the body is seen as disordered. The body exerts too much influence over the intellect. The theological cost of this framework is that it restricts the ability to affirm disability as part of God's good and diverse creation. It forces one to look ahead to the end of disability as part of the end of suffering.

Moltmann's approach is explicit in wanting to embrace the body and to adopt a non-dualistic approach. He identifies the need to reject the idea that the body is an object that one can possess and to embrace instead the idea of being a body as humanity is created for joy, rather than for an instrumental purpose. This perspective allows for a rejection of the view that one's value is based on one's actions, which has been used to discriminate and deny the personhood of people with disabilities. The difficulty with Moltmann's position is how it relates to his eschatological framing. Moltmann understands the human person as in the process of becoming, which allows him to include the person's whole life, so there is no possibility on this side of the eschaton of a complete idea of human personhood. This does not represent a contradiction, since the non-instrumental approach to purpose keeps the future open rather than predetermined. However, the eschatological framing has other limitations, particularly because suffering is intrinsic to the act of creation. While it does allow for an interpretation of limits

without reference to the Fall, it simultaneously builds the need for theodicy into creation and therefore, makes redemption structurally necessary from the outset. It introduces a tension in affirming creation's present goodness. From the perspective of disability, it is important to be able to affirm their existence now, not only at the end of time.

The final section focused on Moltmann's treatment of health and disability. He recognises that there is a problem when good health is understood as an absence of mental and physical challenges as it suggests that part of the population is not living up to an idea of perfection. Instead, Moltmann insists that, whatever one's health, every person possesses dignity and the need to find strength to cope. He rejects the category of disability, interpreting it as a judgment by the strong. It ignores how everyone is limited and vulnerable. Moltmann's suggestion that disabilities are a gift could have reinforced ableist assumptions by valuing people according to their utility or outcomes. However, he avoids this by interpreting disability as a revelation of the woundedness and fragility of human life.

Looking ahead, a key question for Aquinas is how his interpretation of prelapsarian humanity shapes his Christology. By viewing defects as consequences of the Fall rather than intrinsic to creation, Aquinas establishes a framework that affects how Christ can be understood to relate to disability, both physically and intellectually. For Moltmann, the issue is what his eschatological anthropology means for the incarnation when humanity is conceived as undefined and incomplete. Within this framework, what does it mean to say that God became human? Moreover, if suffering is an inherent part of creation there is a question of whether Christ's response will continue to frame disability through a tragic lens. These anthropological frameworks shape not only how disability is understood, but also what kind of Christology becomes possible and what it means to say that Christ assumed human limits.

Chapter Three

The Limits of Christ: Examining His Physicality and Intellect

Introduction

Having examined how Aquinas and Moltmann approach humanity and disability in the previous chapter, the focus now turns to the incarnation. As the first of three chapters on disability Christology, this chapter asks how the incarnation relates to the experience of disability. In *At the Gates,* a woman named Esther is quoted as saying "If you're God and you became human, you've disabled yourself, haven't you? You have put yourself into a condition where there are limitations, where you're mortal."[289] This observation shows how disability is not completely other to the incarnation but speaks to its reality, the taking on of humanity with its limits. How Christ relates to humanity and its limits is crucial for the question of divine solidarity with disabled people. The acceptance of human limits is the first step to stop treating disability as an abnormality. At the same time, it is not enough to look at limits in general; there is a need to differentiate between physical and mental limits to reflect the different experiences of being disabled. It must be reiterated that the aim of this work is not to diagnose Christ with any particular disability; rather, bringing experiences of intellectual and physical disabilities offers a hermeneutic to examine what is valued in Christology and to argue that it is necessary to affirm Christ's human limits. The incarnation means that Christ took on flesh and human limits, but it is not enough to assert that Christ has limits; what matters is how those limits are interpreted.

The first part will focus on the reality of Christ's physical vulnerabilities through the lens of disability. The reality of Christ's humanity has been a key issue in Christology because it is necessary for human salvation which has led to his physical embodiment being emphasised. However, while the physicality of Christ is seen as being a crucial aspect of human salvation, it must be considered what is allowed of Christ's body and why. This is why one of the critical questions in relation to Aquinas is whether soteriology will impact Christ's physical vulnerabilities. As seen in the previous chapter, his understanding of a prelapsarian humanity means that physical vulnerability is not necessarily a precondition to being human. Therefore, it is necessary to ask whether statements of Christ's physical limits can be accepted as part of

[289] Lawson Jacobs and Richardson, *At the Gates*, 150.

describing the reality of humanity rather than as something with a soteriological justification within Aquinas's broader theological commitments. In contrast, Moltmann emphasises the social reality of Christ and as a result, vulnerability, while having a physical element, is primarily about identifying with the marginalised. As a result, Christ is understood to be moved and impacted by the social conditions of the outcasts of society that he physically joins them, becoming one of them. In many ways, Moltmann's Christological approach connects with the social model of disability, where it is not simply about the flesh but how that flesh is marginalised and collectively shaped by social exclusion.

The next section focuses on the intellectual capabilities of Christ. This section has several challenges because of what knowledge signifies in general as well as in relation to Christ specifically. Part of it is the way in which knowledge is valued, and how its absence is understood to be detrimental. This is apparent in how one treats both people with severe intellectual disabilities as well as Christ. People with severe intellectual disabilities have their dignity and personhood questioned on the basis of a lack identified by others. However, the ableism is not always as extreme and explicit as this framing; more often it appears in subtler forms. They are viewed as tragic and objects of pity, because they are seen to be a burden, incompetent, and are unable to be independent. Their quality of life is questioned.

While these judgments are true of physical disabilities, the stigmatisation is particularly acute when the disabled person is seen as being unable to understand and communicate with others. When it comes to Christ, there are a different set of concerns. The first concern is that Christ's knowledge needs to reflect the reality of his humanity. This leads to questions of what he can be thought to know, such as whether he knows that he is God, and how this knowledge relates to his human limits. This raises the question of whether limits must be placed on what he can be thought to know and whether his divinity, in anyway, needs to be altered. But there is another related concern: whether Christ's authority requires that he is knowledgeable. To suggest that Christ lacks knowledge would appear to put his agency and authority at risk.

The section will begin with examining Aquinas's view that Christ possessed perfect human knowledge. Aquinas attributes three different types of knowledge to Christ's humanity: beatific vision; infused knowledge; and acquired knowledge. Aquinas follows the Chalcedonian formula and therefore, Christ's human intellect is subject to limits. However, the presence of limits is not necessarily sufficient; it needs to be examined whether they can be regarded as

authentic human limits or if they risk being undermined with ideas of human perfection. As a result, when examining the three knowledges that Aquinas attributes to Christ, it needs to be asked whether Aquinas sufficiently allows Christ to have a human intellect with real limits. A further challenge concerns the normative assumptions that flow from Aquinas's Christology, particularly the value placed on human independence and cognitive capacity. These views are not just crucial for understanding the limits of Christ's human intellect, but also how intellectual disability is implicitly viewed.

The chapter then moves on to Moltmann, who treats Christ's intellect in a way that is less exact when compared to Aquinas but flows from his social approach to Christology. He approaches knowledge in general as being relational and therefore, it is connected to loving and being transformed by others. Therefore, when looking at Christ specifically, Moltmann's account shifts the focus away from what Christ knows to how he relates to others, from absolute knowledge to the dispositions and actions that constitute mutuality and openness. This framing allows for an account of intellect that centres on interdependence, rather than mastery. However, it must be asked whether it meaningfully includes people with intellectual disabilities who are not always interpreted as active agents. Another aspect of his relational approach is that Christ is understood to grow and receive the help of both the Father and the Spirit. Both the Father and the Spirit are understood to dwell in Christ, help him to understand himself, and leads him throughout his life. Moltmann's approach allows Christ to possess real limits and to learn from others; yet this raises the question of whether in emphasising the Father and the Spirit, he pays sufficient attention to the Son's agency.

3.1. The Physical Vulnerability of Christ

3.1.1. Aquinas and the Physical Defects of Christ

To develop a disability Christology, it is necessary to first examine how Aquinas understands the physicality of Christ. Two central questions guide this study. The first concerns which aspects of Christ's embodiment Aquinas emphasises and what reasoning he provides. The second asks how to hold together the universal and particular elements of Christ's humanity. This tension between universality and particularity present a challenge. Christ's body bears universal significance capable of speaking to a wide range of human experience, yet Christ's human body must also be affirmed as concrete with its limits to avoid abstraction. For disability

Christology, in particular, Christ's physical embodiment is central for showing the dignity of human embodiment. To explore how Christ's humanity can be understood within Aquinas's framework, this section turns first to kenosis. As discussed in Chapter One (pp.35-39), kenosis can be a point of connection between Christology and disability. Kenosis has been interpreted in various ways from self-limitation to annihilation, and the chosen definition will shape how disability is understood.[290] While discussions of kenosis often focus on Christ's intellect, there is also a physical dimension to kenosis: the unlimited has taken on limits, including bodily limits. Both dimensions require careful consideration.

To understand how Aquinas conceives Christ's physical vulnerability, it is necessary first to clarify how he interprets kenosis. In the history of kenotic interpretation Aquinas does not take a radical position on kenosis, rather his account fits within what Ruth Groenhout categorises as "giving up of prerogatives", where Christ surrenders what is due to him as divine rather than relinquishing his divine powers.[291] The incarnation, therefore, does not mark a change in Christ's divinity. In his reading of Philippians 2:7, Aquinas does not interpret "emptied himself" (NRSV) as referring to the loss of his divinity, rather he argues "He remained what He was; and what He was not, He assumed."[292] The emptying is understood by Aquinas to refer to the assumption of human nature and therefore, Christ's humanity is *added* to his divinity. *Prima facie,* this might appear to go against the idea of emptying which seems to suggest taking away rather than of addition. Aquinas provides multiple reasons to explain this apparent paradox, but the primary one is the addition of human nature can be regarded as emptying because human nature is marked by potency. Emery observes that Aquinas's account of the soul reveals potency in two ways. First, potency is evident in the soul's operations, such as the intellect which moves from potentially knowing to knowing. Secondly, the human person is potent in the act of being as their existence is participated rather than self-sufficient. One's existence is dependent on God and others, and one is subject to change. There is no stability in human nature.[293] The result is that, according to Aquinas, the emptying at the incarnation does not refer to only the assumption of human nature but also *the kind of nature* that is assumed.

[290] For a list of the different ways which outlines the kenosis spectrum cf. Ruth Groenhout, 'Kenosis and Feminist Theory', in *Exploring Kenotic Christology: The Self-Emptying of God*, ed. C. Stephen Evans (Oxford University Press, 2006), 297-299.
[291] Cf. Groenhout, 'Kenosis and Feminist Theory', 297–98.
[292] Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, trans. F. R. Larcher (Magi Books, Inc., 1969), 2.2.
[293] Cf. Gilles Emery, 'Kenosis, Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas', *Nova et Vetera* 17, no. 3 (2019): 245–46.

In viewing kenosis as the addition of human nature, Aquinas's account suggests that the incarnation affirms the integrity of human embodiment. Rather than signifying absence, kenosis is understood by Aquinas, in part, as reflecting the difference in scale between humanity and divinity. He interprets kenosis as meaning that "Christ made himself little by taking on our littleness; and in order that he might truly show himself to be little *he was made in the likeness of men.*"[294] Aquinas thus contrasts Christ's two natures: acting through a limited human nature appears small compared with the divinity that cannot even be captured by language. Christ takes on a humanity that, like all of humanity, is weak and with limits. However, the contrast can also be read as reinforcing a hierarchical binary, humanity as deficient and God as whole. This issue will be explored in more depth in Chapter Five, but it is important to note that Aquinas's language of smallness need not imply deficiency. It indicates the immeasurable difference between divine and human nature. This smallness can coexist with integrity and value, provided human vulnerability is understood as worthy of divine assumption. This conceptual clarification is central for disability theology to avoid the suggestion that human nature must be something other than it is. By centring kenosis on the nature that Christ assumes, Aquinas's framework opens a way to interpret disability as part of being human, rather than as a sign of a lack.

Aquinas's primary understanding of kenosis is that it denotes Christ assuming human nature, but as Emery observes, it also refers to Christ taking on the conditions of humanity, including its physical defects like hunger.[295] Aquinas draws from Matthew 8:17, where the author quotes Isaiah 53:4, "He took our infirmities and bore our diseases."[296] From a disability perspective, the verse can be read as suggesting that when Christ takes on human nature, this assumption encompasses the experience of disability. If it is to be read as referring to the nature of the incarnation, the question then arises as to how these infirmities relate to Christ. Aquinas understands that there are three reasons that explain why Christ assumed bodily defects; to

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[294] Thomas Aquinas, 'Sermon Puer Iesus', trans. Athanasius Sulavik, Isidore, 30 May 2025, https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/SermPuerIesus.htm. Emphasis in original.
[295] Cf. Emery, 'Kenosis, Christ, and the Trinity in Thomas Aquinas', 850.
[296] New Testament scholars are divided on how to interpret Matthew's citation of Isaiah 53:4. Some note that the author does not follow the LXX and Targum translations, which use "sins" rather than "infirmities." Others argue that the close association between disease and sin renders the difference insignificant. Still others suggest that the verse highlights Christ's power, unlike the Suffering Servant, he does not bear infirmities in his own body or that Matthew identifies Christ with the Servant who shares in broken humanity.
Cf. Francis Wright Beare, *The Gospel According to Matthew: A Commentary* (Basil Blackwell, 1981), 211–12; cf. Richard Beaton, 'Isaiah in Matthew's Gospel', in *Isaiah in the New Testament*, ed. Steve Moyise and Maarten J. J. Menken (T & T Clark, 2005), 69–70; cf. Donald A. Hagner, *Matthew 1-13*, World Biblical Commentary (Word Books, 1993), 33A:210; cf. David E. Garland, *Reading Matthew: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the First Gospel* (Crossroad, 1993), 97–98.

show the reality of Christ's human nature, to make satisfaction for sin and to offer an example of patience.[297]

Before going further in analysing Aquinas's treatment of Christ's infirmities, it is necessary to reflect on the relationship between illness and disability. Disability is a modern term, but throughout the Bible and in the history of theology, illnesses and disease have been interpreted and used as metaphors for theological ideas. These metaphors may provide resources for a disability theology, but they also risk reducing disability to illness. The two are closely related: illnesses can cause disabilities, and chronic illnesses are often understood to be disabilities. However, illness also includes temporary conditions that cannot properly be described as disabilities. There is an overlap between the terms, but they are not synonyms for each other. It is necessary to resist the conflation of the two because it risks trapping disability in the medical model once more. Illness is rarely treated as having any potential neutral or positive value, unless a good is understood to have come from an illness. The experience of disability shares this characteristic, but as explored in Chapter One (§1.1.1.), disability should not be reduced to suffering. Clarifying this distinction is essential before turning to Aquinas, whose account of infirmity risks collapsing these categories.

One of the reasons why Aquinas argues that Christ assumed human infirmities is his commitment to safeguarding the reality of Christ's human nature.[298] Following the Chalcedonian understanding of Christ, Aquinas believes in the hypostatic union which declares that Christ is one person with two natures. Each nature is distinct yet "retains what is proper to it."[299] For Aquinas, attributing human defects to Christ affirms his human nature. If Christ did not have any defects, Aquinas suggests that Christ would not have seemed truly human; his weaknesses served to hide his divinity.[300] Yet this does not amount to an affirmation of infirmity itself. Christ's infirmities are a way to protect him from the accusation of Docetism, but this is different from Aquinas viewing Christ's infirmities as being a necessary part of humanity. As discussed in Chapter Two (§2.1.3), human vulnerability is not a necessary part of humanity and therefore, Aquinas understands it as being possible for Christ to possess a prelapsarian human nature that was not corruptible. As discussed in Chapter One (pp.34-35), Rempel sees that a key contribution disability gives to Christology is its anti-docetic spirit

[297] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.
[298] Cf. Paul Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas* (University of Scranton, 2009), 142.
[299] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.46.12.
[300] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.

which requires that one takes seriously Christ's contingency. This raises the further question of what is deemed to be proper to Christ's human nature.

While Aquinas sees Christ's infirmities as showing the genuineness of his humanity, it is because Aquinas understands them as reflecting a fallen world. Fallen human nature differs from prelapsarian human nature, specifically, the loss of God's grace. After the Fall, human nature reflects what human "nature [is like] left to itself," in other words, what human nature is like without God's grace.[301] Christ could have assumed a prelapsarian humanity, yet Brian Davies observes that Aquinas understands "the Incarnation as God acting for the benefit of people as they are since the fall of Adam. He therefore finds it appropriate for God, as human, to assume some of the physical limitations that people now typically endure."[302] From a soteriological perspective, it makes sense that Christ suffers from some of the consequences of the Fall.

However, for Aquinas, Christ's humanity is not a binary choice between a prelapsarian or Fallen nature. Christ's humanity is seen as being like Adam's in that it is without Original Sin, but Aquinas also views Christ as having assumed the consequences of the Fall such as suffering. Aquinas argues Christ freely chose to take on the punishments of Original Sin.[303] For Aquinas, the sense that Christ's infirmities and defects make him truly human is not on the level of being or nature but on the level of appearances. If Christ had not suffered from defects, he would have appeared to others as an alien. Still, this idea of concealment has limits and should be handled with care. God chose the medium of humanity with its limits to reveal himself. If these limitations are seen not merely as consequences of sin but as part of the nature, it means that Christ's limits are not simply to obfuscate but are accepted as part of the way that God has chosen to communicate.

For Aquinas, the existence of Christ's defects is not solely to ensure that Christ's humanity appears real in the current context, it is also so that the defects can be healed. Aquinas quotes John of Damascus who said that "What is unassumable is incurable."[304] This line is

[301] Thomas Aquinas, *Questiones Disputatae de Veritate*, trans. Robert W. Mulligan (Henry Regnery Company, 1952), 25.7, https://isidore.co/aquinas/QDdeVer.htm.
[302] Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (Oxford University Press, 2014), 304.
[303] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.3.
[304] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.4.

frequently quoted because it highlights Christ's solidarity with particular groups; yet it is not simply for identification, but transformation. This dictum will be returned to later when considering Moltmann's interpretation. For Aquinas, the assumption of these attributes is to cure them. However, from a disability theology perspective, this can only be accepted insofar as Christ takes on the social model and the physical and mental pain of disability; to go any further risks suggesting that all disabilities require a cure. Putting aside the danger of what a cure means, another difficulty arises from the suggestion that to be cured an attribute *must* be assumed by Christ. Recognising this limitation, Aquinas argues Christ could not possess every defect. Instead, he maintains that Christ, in taking on human nature, is passible and corruptible, which are the core aspects of defects. In determining whether one can say that a defect is applicable to Christ, Aquinas argues that it must be compliant with his understanding that Christ possesses perfect knowledge and grace. Lucas Stamps, in his analysis of Aquinas, observes that defects are either "common-cause defects" and "particular-cause defects". Only the former can be applied to Christ.[305]

The primary difficulty lies in discerning what can be thought of as a common-cause defect. As explored in Chapter Two (pp.60–63), Aquinas understands bodily capacities as differently affected by Original Sin. The consequences of Original Sin are not felt equally, and this raises the challenge of what can be understood to be in common. Among the examples Aquinas explicitly gives, hunger, thirst, and death, each can be experienced by any human, suggesting that the physical defects are understood to be universal.[306] These examples imply that Christ shared the same needs as the rest of humanity, including real bodily needs. For the purposes of this study, the issue is not Aquinas's specific examples of physical defects but what remains unsaid, particularly in relation to illness and disability. Stamps has pushed this question further in considering whether Christ could become ill. He argues, using Aquinas's criteria, that one could maintain that Christ could experience at least common illnesses, like a cold.[307] Yet this raises the question of what qualifies as common, and where the line should be drawn. One might include frequently occurring conditions such as colds, sore throats, headaches, or diarrhoea, but what constitutes a common illness is contextual, with factors such as time period, medical understanding, social responses and environment all impact what can be regarded as common.

[305] R. Lucas Stamps, 'Did Jesus Ever Get Sick? Some Thoughts on Christ's Human Nature', *CRT* 13, no. 1 (2015): 72–73.
[306] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.4.
[307] Cf. Stamps, 'Did Jesus Ever Get Sick?', 73.

The problem with the idea that Christ took on common-cause defects lies not only with identifying certain illnesses as common but also because illnesses impact people differently. The variety of effects is due to multiple factors from genetic history, age, environment, and lifestyle choices. Therefore, even if one limits the focus to what might be considered common illnesses, their effect on Christ could be imagined in markedly different ways. One could imagine Christ as genuinely human yet largely impervious from any serious effects of illness due to a healthy constitution. From a disability perspective, however, the question is whether Christ is protected from the vulnerability that marks the human condition. To say that Christ could be disabled is to affirm his real vulnerability. Yet in appealing to the idea of common defects risks abstraction, detaching them from Christ's concrete embodiment. Common-cause defects might be regarded as a safeguard against speculative diagnosis of Christ, but Aquinas's reasoning is not epistemological modesty. Aquinas approaches this through four criteria, which, as Stamps notes, determine whether Christ could become sick with an illness: first, that Christ freely assumed it; second, that it is "common to fallen humanity"; third, that it did not impact Christ's perfections; and finally, that it has soteriological significance.[308] How one prioritises these conditions determines whether illness, and by extension, disability, can be attributed to Christ. The final condition, that illness must be soteriologically significant, raises the further question of how such significance could be achieved.

One reason one might hesitate to attribute physical defects to Christ is the concern that the defects could impact his mission on earth.[309] Aquinas recognises that this objection could threaten various aspects of Christ's mission, ranging from his healing others to his triumph over the devil.[310] It suggests Christ also needs healing. However, Aquinas rejects this view, arguing that Christ was not hindered by his infirmities as they furthered the ends of the Incarnation. Aquinas, like others before him, distinguishes between the punishment and guilt of sin.[311] This distinction allows him to claim Christ experienced the consequences of Original Sin but without sharing the guilt. Therefore, there is no reason to suggest that Christ is implicated by assuming the punishment. His infirmities did not prevent him from experiencing grace fully or obstruct

[308] Stamps, 'Did Jesus Ever Get Sick?', 73–74.
[309] For example, Athanasius argues that it would not be fitting for Christ to have died from illness, because his death had to occur at the hands of others, rather than by a natural cause. Furthermore, Athanasius also contends that it would be inappropriate for Christ to heal others and not himself. Cf. Athanasius, 'On the Incarnation of the Word', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 4, ed. Philip Schaff and Wace Henry, trans. Archibald Robertson (Christian Literature Publishing, 1892), 21–23, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/2802.htm.
[310] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.
[311] Cf. Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 161.

his soteriological mission. Aquinas argues that in overcoming evil, that it was not by *bodily* strength that matters but *spiritual* strength.[312] How Aquinas understands this spiritual strength will be examined in the next chapter; but one could suggest that his position on defects means that the physical makeup of Christ, with its limitations, is not an obstacle to redemption but rather a medium of revelation. The difficulty, however, lies in Aquinas's continual framing of the punishment of sin as being related to human vulnerability. The body and its vulnerabilities are not treated as a neutral state of affairs. The connection between the punishment of sin and human vulnerability, leaves little space to consider how these vulnerabilities might be an integral part of who Christ is in the incarnation. This raises a further question about what kind of embodied human life assumes.

If one imagines the decision to become incarnate, the subsequent question would be about the kind of embodiment that Christ would take on. Christ is not just flesh, but a specific and situated embodiment. From this perspective, Christ assuming physical defects is part of the decision to become human. Aquinas understands Christ as male because Christ must possess a sexual body to highlight the reality of the incarnation. As Gondreau argues, this ensures that Christ's humanity is not an abstraction.[313] For Aquinas, the sex refers to the physical embodiment of the person, but it has a relationship with one's sexuality. To put it simply, there is the existence of one's genitalia and then what one does with the genitalia. Aquinas follows Albert the Great in believing that "human sexuality is … an expression of God's creative activity and, hence, as part of the 'nature of things.'"[314] However, human sexuality can be misused. Christ, a moral exemplar, has a sexual body but that "He did not assume sex for its use," and therefore, exemplifies chastity.[315] In assuming the defects of Original Sin, Aquinas argues that Christ was also an example for living with suffering and defects patiently.[316] Yet defects are interpreted differently than sexuality because they would not exist without Original Sin.[317] This discussion of Christ's sexed embodiment highlights a central challenge in Aquinas's Christology: how Christ's particular body relates to the universality of his redemptive work.

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[312] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.
[313] Cf. Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 146.
[314] Gondreau, *The Passions of Christ's Soul in the Theology of St. Thomas Aquinas*, 147.
[315] Aquinas, 'Commentary on the Sentences', 3.12.1.
[316] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.14.1.
[317] Aquinas differs from Augustine of Hippo in viewing sexual relations as not being a result of the Fall. Aquinas understands sexuality, primarily, procreation, as being asked of Adam in the command to multiply in Genesis 1:28. Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.98.1-2.

The focus of this research is not on questions of gender or sexuality, but examining Aquinas's treatment of them clarifies his account of embodiment and its relevance for disability. Christ possesses a concrete sexual body to underscore the reality of his humanity. Aquinas lived in a context where gender was seen as a binary, yet he still affirms the need for particularity rather than abstraction in describing Christ's embodiment. This attention to Christ's concrete embodiment contrasts with the appeal to common defects, which risks suggesting that Christ possessed a universal humanity, rather than a particular instance of humanity with universal significance. Disability theologians have appealed to human vulnerability or limits as a way to move beyond binary views of disability and ability, and as a means of connecting disability to Christ without claiming he had a particular disability. Yet there remains the question of whether this approach repeats Aquinas mistake of making a universal statement that could fail to do justice the particularities of one's flesh. When it comes to Christ, whose bodily particulars are unavailable, there is a need to affirm the reality of Christ's humanity, including his physical limits. Appealing to vulnerability inevitably entails a degree of imprecision, since one cannot access Christ's particular limits, nonetheless it makes Christ's humanity more concrete.

The challenge that emerges is that while Aquinas clearly takes the reality of Christ's body seriously, he does not consider the possibility that Christ's vulnerabilities might be of value beyond their soteriological significant. The focus on soteriology risks obscuring other dimensions of what Christ's vulnerable flesh reveals. Eboni Marshall Turman's critique of Chalcedonian Christology helps to outline the problem. She observes that while many churches have claimed to follow the Chalcedonian definition with its "both/and," in reality they have not, because they followed "a specific narrative, one that ascribes to a binary hierarchy of sort that too often divinizes certain kinds of flesh, while demonizing others."[318] In the process of othering, Marshall Turman argues, there is the continuation of the "either/or" logic which Marshall Turman sees Chalcedon as trying to avoid, highlighting Chalcedon's "crucial "coming-togetherness"".[319] From this perspective, Aquinas arguing that Christ takes on some of the defects of human nature can be seen as resisting the binary because Christ is identifying with human limits. If Christ's body is understood to have defects, it means that they are not inappropriate for the divine, and this challenges any suggestion of inferiority. It suggests that the problem is not the punishment of sin but the sin itself. However, at the same time, it cannot be avoided that the defects are taken on in order to heal, and this may allow one to suggest that they are not unfitting for Christ's body to have them, but it nonetheless prevents their

[318] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 38.
[319] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 37.

normalisation. The defects continue to be associated with the Fall. In Christ taking them on in this way, the association persists as something that elicits pitied, rather than as a natural aspect of human embodiment.

One of the aspects that becomes apparent in Aquinas's treatment of Christ's defects is that while Aquinas understands creation as being finite and contingent, categories that would appear to be fruitful for disability Christology, he gives little attention to what finitude means apart from its association with sin's punishment. Aquinas understands that humans have limits based on their nature, yet it remains unclear how to interpret this physically when the defects he lists, hunger and thirst, are ordinary aspects of human life. The issue is not the limit itself, but the conditions that make them harmful. As will become apparent in the next section, there is a need to consider the social conditions of flesh. In Aquinas's framework, defects are not the main focus of divine judgment since they are the consequence of sin. Therefore, the focus should be on sin itself. The difficulty, however, is that Aquinas does not provide an account of human finitude that acknowledges limits and vulnerabilities as intrinsic to creaturely nature rather than as marks of punishment. The only limits that one can be thought of as truly neutral are those of embodiment itself: to be limited to a particular time and place and to depend upon God as the source of one's being. This does not go far enough; it is necessary to recognise that human vulnerability is not a defect. It is for this reason that it is constructive to follow Creamer's model of limits which argues that "Limits are a normal and unsurprising aspect of life."[320] Following, this model allows disability and limits to be recognised as an integral aspect of the human experience and recognises that they are shared by all bodies. Christ needs food, water, sleep, and the help of others and this was not shameful; rather it expressed the nature that he took on.

3.1.2. Moltmann and the Relational and Transient Flesh of Christ

Moltmann's theology offers a distinct framework for disability Christology, in which both God and creation are characterised as open and vulnerable. In contrast to Aquinas, Moltmann does not associate vulnerability with sin; rather, he understands it as intrinsic to relationships, for both creation and God. From a disability perspective, this reorientation is significant because it prevents vulnerability from being interpreted solely as a problem, but as integral to both human

[320] Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 129.

and divine life. Moltmann argues that God is open and vulnerable precisely because he is in a relationship with the world, and this relationality should mean that he is affected by it. For Moltmann, the claim that God loves requires that God be vulnerable and can suffer in response.[321] Because divine vulnerability is intrinsic, Moltmann does not understand kenosis as a unique feature of the incarnation but is a quality that exists from the act of creation. The limitations and vulnerabilities of Christ are not antithetical to the idea of divinity, and therefore, there is no need to conceal or abandon Christ's divinity in the incarnation. This represents a very different approach to Christology than Aquinas's approach. Rather than focusing on nature, Moltmann makes relationship a central concept because the ontological approach overlooks the need to understand Christ through his relationships.[322] This approach has the potential to allow Christ to connect with the social conditions of disability. Yet, as this section will explore, Moltmann's turn to relational vulnerability raises further questions about how he connects Christ's social identity with the transience of creation.

Prior to examining how Moltmann conceives the physicality of Christ, several key aspects of his Christology must be introduced. Moltmann argues that God is actively engaged in the world, in contrast to the God of classical theism, who it is argued remains unmoved by the suffering of others. Part of the problem with classical theism, Moltmann argues, lies in its Christological consequences: divinity needs to be protected, which prevents a reciprocal relationship between the two natures.[323] What is at stake is the question of how to understand the communication of idioms. For Moltmann, *communicatio idiomatum,* the communication of idioms, means that the human characteristics can be attributed to God. Aquinas understands *communicatio idiomatum* as allowing for contradictory statements, like the "immaterial became material". Where Moltmann and Aquinas differ is over whether there is a need to retain the distinctions between Christ's two natures. According to Aquinas, one must recognise that it is through Christ's humanity that one can attribute suffering or materiality.[324] However, Moltmann disagrees, citing Luther who argues that Christ's humanity should not be viewed like a coat that can be taken off; the two natures should not be united merely intellectually, rather, the union "exists in their very being".[325] The communication of idioms is important for disability Christology because it raises a central question: whether disability should be attributed to Christ's humanity alone or also to his divinity. This question will be explored further in Chapter Five. Part of Moltmann's reasoning stems from the desire to stress the unity of the immanent

[321] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 235–36.
[322] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 136–37.
[323] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 238–40.
[324] Aquinas, *SCG*, 4.39.2.
[325] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 240.

and economic Trinity. Moltmann is inspired by Karl Rahner's maxim that "The economic Trinity *is* the immanent Trinity, and the immanent Trinity *is* the economic Trinity."[326] Without this unity, he argues, God could be viewed as being different to who he has revealed himself in history. Moltmann's use of Rahner's maxim, thus, allows for God and Christ to be understood as being much more engaged in history. Moltmann argues that Christ is to be understood "dynamically, in the forward movement of God's history with the world."[327] Like the rest of humanity, Christ cannot be understood as complete; he is still in the process of coming. It means that his actions in history define who he is.

This emphasis on relationships, rather than nature, leads Moltmann to describe his Christology as "an emphatically *social* christology".[328] While Moltmann is critical of the way that the doctrine of the two natures has been understood, he does not completely abandon it, but reinterprets it. Moltmann argues that Christ's divinity refers to his exclusive and unique relationship as the "only begotten Son" and his humanity refers to being "the first-born among many brethren."[329] As Son, Christ has an *ex*clusive relationship with the Father, but he has an *in*clusive relationship with humanity.[330] Christ is unique by virtue of being the Son, yet he draws the rest of humanity into relationship with the Father, through their shared humanity. He identifies with humanity and is shaped by his experiences of others and helps to ensure that the solidaric element of Christ is central. In becoming flesh, Moltmann argues that one cannot use prepositions like being *in* to describe Christ's relationship to his humanity, because there is no element of Christ that is separated from his divinity. This helps to differentiate Christ from the Spirit, but it also makes clear that, not only Christ's consciousness but his physicality "bears the imprint of his divine sonship."[331] There is no sense of separation, even of Christ's physicality from being the Son. This approach allows Moltmann to call Christ "the human God," as his humanity has become part of eternal life. The taking on of humanity is not a temporary event.[332] Christ is constituted through his humanity; it is not just an addition to his divine nature. His embodiment is not just an instrument or vessel, but essential to who he is. As a result, there is a sense that Christ needs the incarnation, a point that will be returned to in Chapter Five.

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[326] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 248. Emphasis in original.
[327] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, xiii.
[328] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 71. Emphasis in original.
[329] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 120.
[330] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 120.
[331] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 84.
[332] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 118–19.

With the incarnation, Christ enters the messiness, struggle, and pain of human life, according to Moltmann, rather than remaining above it. This identification is expressed not only through the affirmation of Christ's flesh but also through those with whom he identifies. Samuel Youngs observes that part of Moltmann's approach to Christological kenosis is social kenosis, referring to Christ's identification with those who are oppressed.[333] For Moltmann, kenosis describes how Christ approaches the world. He does not come for the powerful and violent people, but for the poor, which Moltmann views as shorthand for "the hungry, the unemployed, the sick, the discouraged, and the sad and suffering."[334] Christ does not simply come on their behalf; he identifies with them, to the extent that he became one of them.[335] From a disability perspective, Moltmann's approach allows for the possibility that Christ identifies with disabled people. This is further supported by Moltmann's reading of Isaiah 53:4, which means that Christ has taken on disability, illness, and helplessness, bringing them into God's eternal life. He also appeals to John of Damascus's dictum, "What is unassumable is incurable," introduced earlier, but applies it differently. Moltmann does not attempt to explain how Christ takes on the experience of disability, except by appealing to the idea that Christ "takes on the whole weak human nature".[336] As discussed in Chapter Two (pp.74-76), Moltmann rejects the binary between people with disabilities and non-disabled people; thus, there is no need to identify with a particular disability. The key aspect of the incarnation for Moltmann is that Christ suffers and identifies with those who suffer. In Philippians 2:7, the verse describes Christ as taking on "the form of a slave" which is interpreted by Moltmann as referring to Christ's life and death, and how he "shared the fate of these enslaved people… their misery which Jesus experienced in his own body."[337] Moltmann extends the notion of vulnerability beyond the physical fragility that comes with being human: Christ enters "into the situation of their sin and God-forsakenness."[338]

As part of Christ's identification with those who are oppressed, Moltmann appeals to the idea that Christ is a non-person. Moltmann rejects the anhypostatic position, which understands Christ as possessing a non-personal human nature, because Moltmann argues that it rejects the historicity of the person of Christ.[339] While Moltmann can be accused of creating a strawman argument, his reasoning is clear: he seeks to do justice to the idea that Christ was a

[333] Cf. Samuel Youngs, *The Way of the Kenotic Christ: The Christology of Jürgen Moltmann* (Cascade Books, 2019), ch. 6.
[334] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 99.
[335] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 102.
[336] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 116–17.
[337] Moltmann, *Jesus Christ in Today's World,* 104.
[338] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 119.
[339] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 51.

particular, historical human being, and the anhypostatic position risks making Christ different from the rest of humanity, without a key aspect of humanity.[340] However, Moltmann reinterprets the idea of being a non-person in a social sense. He writes that Christ:

> …assumed the human being who is really a 'non-person'? Has he, that is, taken on deficient human nature in its deepest humiliation? In this case the incarnation itself would already be the assumption of the de-humanized, de-personalized, oppressed human being who has been degraded to mere 'brute matter'; and it would also mean the healing of this dehumanized human being for eternal human dignity.[341]

This passage highlights that non-personhood is not an ontological claim but refers to the social conditions that result in the denigration of one's personhood and flesh. In taking on these conditions, Christ becomes brute matter. To be brute matter or a non-person is not an abstract description, but a commentary on the social conditions that reduce groups of people to objects, rather than recognising their human dignity. Thus, Christ's deficient human nature represents his identification with oppressed and dehumanised groups. For Moltmann, Christ's personhood, or lack of personhood, is constituted by his relationships with others. However, this approach raises several concerns, particularly when viewed through a disability lens. A particular challenge is that Moltmann risks grounding personhood too heavily on the perception of others. This concern is particularly relevant from a disability perspective, as it draws attention to the question of who is allowed to define the lives of disabled people. These issues will be addressed in subsequent chapters, but for this chapter, the crucial aspect is that Moltmann understands Christ as not simply taking on human flesh, but also taking on how it has been degraded by social conditions.

The through line of Moltmann's approach to Christ's flesh is that it is deeply vulnerable and shaped by the social conditions of the world in which Christ chose to live, among those on the margins. One of the consequences of Moltmann's approach is that there is no aspect of human life that is too shameful for Christ to identify with and experience, including disability. Christ's life and the people with whom he surrounded himself, challenged the social order of his day, and therefore, aligns closely with the social model of disability. Within this model, cultural imperialism forms part of the structures of oppression faced by people with disabilities. The concept describes the social division constructed between disabled people and non-disabled

[340] The idea that Christ is anhypostatic denies that his human nature was a distinct person prior to the incarnation. It asserts that Christ's humanity has no independent hypostasis apart from the world, therefore avoiding any suggestion of adoptionism. As will be discussed later in this chapter, Moltmann appears to embrace a qualified form of adoptionism; however, because he understands the Spirit as dwelling in Christ from his conception, it could be argued that he is not really denying the anhypostatic position. Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 73–74.
[341] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 51.

people, and how, at almost every level in society, it is assumed that it is more desirable to not be disabled. The result is that disabled people are othered.[342] Iris Marion Young writes that "In its identification of some groups with despised or ugly bodies, rationalistic culture contributes to the oppressions of cultural imperialism and violence".[343] The visual logic of othering enables the dominant group to affirm itself as being the norm, while those who are marked as different cannot escape their visible otherness.[344] Although Young's focus is not on disabilities, but on how the Enlightenment constructed white, European men as the embodiment of rationality, her framework applies to disability studies.

This connects directly with Moltmann's idea of brute matter, where oppressed people are treated as objects, rather than as people endowed with dignity. Christ relates to people with disabilities because, through their experiences of oppression, they share the status of non-persons, who Christ identifies with when he takes on a deficient human nature. The judgment for Moltmann is not against human nature when he calls it deficient, but against the processes that judge it as deficient. This represents a very different approach from Aquinas, who understands Christ's defects primarily as a response to the Fall. In Moltmann's theology, Christ's flesh can be understood as socially disabled, since the focus is on the social conditions rather than on impairment.

Having examined the social dimensions of Moltmann's Christology, the discussion now turns to how Christ relates to all of creation. Moltmann's social approach to flesh provides a different perspective on disability, viewing it not as a sign of a world marked by the Fall, but as a question of how people are treated, rather than a moral judgement on people's embodiment. As Betcher argues, it is a mistake to look at Eden as the cause of "human malaise"; instead, attention should be on the present. The shift away from Eden forces one to take a humble view of human knowledge, due to the complexity of the world.[345] This social identification is only one aspect of Christ's solidarity with the world for Moltmann. His theology moves beyond the social realm to encompass creation, introducing both tensions and possibilities for disability Christology. Moltmann understands Christ as assuming not only the social conditions of humanity, he also understands Christ as having become flesh to heal *all flesh*. In this view, there

[342] Cf. Barnes and Mercer, *Disability*, 21–22.
[343] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton University Press, 1990), 11.
[344] Cf. Young, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, 123.
[345] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 21.

is no separation between Christ and any living thing.[346] Moltmann's theology makes the entry point to Christ's flesh accessible to all; one does not need to be intelligent or strong, but simply a living creature. The Hebrew term *basar,* normally translated as flesh in the New Testament (for example, in John 1:14), is key for Moltmann. He observes that its meanings range from "the whole human being, body and soul" to "everything that lives, in its weakness, helplessness, transience and mortality" to "in community with all the living". In short, *basar* should be translated as life, showing that all of creation is interconnected.[347] In response to the ecological crisis, Moltmann argues against anthropocentric Christologies, instead advocating for a deep incarnation that unites Christ with all of creation. Although rooted in ecological concerns, this vision has consequences for disability Christology.

Moltmann's deep incarnation extends Christ's solidarity to all living beings, and in doing so, brings the focus back to the fragility of creation. His attention to the vulnerability of creation requires a closer look at how he relates sin, suffering, and transience. In Chapter Two (pp.72-73), it was outlined how Moltmann argues that it is a mistake to view suffering as a question of sin; rather, it is a part of the limits of creation. However, later in Moltmann's career, he writes that "mortality is a consequence of sin," and, as a result, he argues against the idea that Christ assumed a human nature without sin.[348] To be born or to die requires that Christ be mortal.[349] It could be viewed as consistent with Moltmann's approach to flesh, as outlined in this chapter, if one understands mortality as becoming a problem because of sin. Dying at the hands of others is a result of sin, and therefore, one can regard mortality as a consequence of sin. But this does not work because he includes mortality as necessary for Christ to be born. Moltmann is going deeper than the social conditions of the flesh. This tension between sin and transience will shape how disability can be understood as part of creation's fragility in Moltmann's theology.

One of the reasons that Moltmann moves beyond the social conditions of Christ's death is because he understands it as being inevitable that Christ would have died, regardless of the crucifixion. Christ is not understood to have come only in solidarity with a world that cries out for justice, but also in solidarity "with the whole sighing creation… that 'sighs; because it is

[346] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'Is God Incarnate in All That Is?', in *Incarnation: On the Scope and Depth of Christology*, ed. Niels Henrik Gregersen (Fortress Press, 2015), 120.
[347] Moltmann, 'Is God Incarnate in All That Is?', 126–27.
[348] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 51.
[349] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 52.

subject to transience."[350] There is a tragic element to the world, where there is a "desire to live," but one will die.[351] Existence is limited to the present moment; there is nothing that one can hold onto. The current moment, which is marked by transience and death, is not what was intended by God, for creation is made to share God's eternal life.[352] The world is waiting for a contradiction of the current moment. He describes death as something that cannot be understood as either natural or the consequence of sin.[353] Rather than argue Moltmann has changed position, it seems Moltmann is struggling with wanting to avoid particular positions. On the one hand, mortality as being the fault of sin risks making it the fault of humanity, when Moltmann regards the concept of a fallen humanity as "highly dubious."[354] As explored in Chapter Two (pp.72-73), he does see sin as being the result of limits, rather than the cause. On the other hand, he does not want to treat the world's transience and mortality as being natural because this would suggest that creation, as it is currently, should be accepted rather than contradicted. He acknowledges that there is "a sadness [that] lies over nature which is the expression of its tragic fate and its messianic yearning. It is enslaved and wishes to be free."[355] There is a need to liberate creation's flesh for reasons other than the injustice that it experiences. Given this account of mortality and Moltmann's rejection of fallen humanity, it is necessary to clarify what Moltmann means when writing that Christ assumes a sinful human nature.

Moltmann's references to Christ taking on a sinful nature are sporadic and lack detail, but several aspects of Moltmann's theology can help reveal his intentions. First, it would appear that for Moltmann, sinful nature should be understood as description of creation's current state as wounded and transient, rather than as a moral category. As previously mentioned, he has reservations about the universality of sin. Creation, in its present state, is not, according to Moltmann, able "to join in the Creator's original verdict 'Behold, it was very good' (Gen. 1.31). Much more applicable to the present condition of the created world is Paul's recognition of the 'anxious waiting'… which is subjected to futility".[356] The focus is on how the world cannot be stated as good in its entirety. John of Damascus's dictum could suggest that Christ does not just need to take on human flesh, but also the flesh that reflects the world as it is currently, which waits for redemption. It is necessary to place Christ firmly in this current stage of the story of

[350] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 169.
[351] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 169.
[352] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 124.
[353] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 170.
[354] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 68. It should be noted that this is not a complete rejection of Original Sin, elsewhere Moltmann writes how the problem is that interpretations that stress the universality of sin risks overlooking the injustice in the world. Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 124–25.
[355] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 68.
[356] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 39.

redemption. Writing on nature, understood here as the world's natural phenomena rather than essence, he argues that "To understand 'nature' as creation therefore means discerning 'nature' as the enslaved creation that hopes for liberty. So by 'nature' we can only mean a single act in the great drama of the creation of the world on the way to the kingdom of glory – the act that is being played out at the present time."[357] The assertion that Christ assumes a sinful nature appears to be about placing his pre-resurrection flesh firmly into this current act. He is also part of a world marked by transience, suffering, and futility

The second key area is that Christ's sinful nature may relate to the openness of creation. In the act of creation, God limits himself in order to create a free Other.[358] This openness means that creation is not safe; it is "Open for its own destruction as well as its redemption in a new creation. It is not perfect but perfectible. It is good, but that does not exclude the possibility that it can become worse or the possibility that it can become better."[359] In considering Christ as part of creation, he is also understood to share in this risk. There is the potential to sin and to suffer.[360] This does not mean that Christ is a sinner, but that there is the possibility that he could sin. The assumption of limits means that he was vulnerable to the same forces that can make humans turn to destruction.

This account of openness and risks clarifies Moltmann's concept of sinful nature, but it also has implications for Christ's human fragility. Moltmann's approach helps to ensure that the purpose of the incarnation is not simply restitution for sin, but also redemption for the frailty and mortality of creation, without conflating the two. From a disability perspective, the key question is how to understand this emphasis on transience and mortality. Disabled people have often been viewed as symbols of what others fear: a lack of autonomy, suffering, and death. The disability activist Paul Hunt wrote that "People do not want to acknowledge what disability affirms-that life is tragic and we shall all soon be dead."[361] With Hunt's perspective in mind, Moltmann's understanding of Christ as having taken on the pain of transience through the

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[357] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 39.
[358] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 59.
[359] Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution, and the Future*, trans. M. Douglas Meeks (Charles Scribner's Sins, 1969), 35.
[360] Theologians such as Karl Barth and J. B. Torrance argue that Christ assumes a fallen human nature, distinguishing it from a sinful nature. Moltmann uses the language of sin, which could be interpreted as Moltmann taking a different position, though there is a lack of detail in Moltmann's writing to make a definitive judgement on why he prefers sinful nature over fallen nature. It may reflect his reservations about how Original Sin has been interpreted as being inherent rather than recognising its contextual nature and the place of power. Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 124–25.
[361] Paul Hunt, 'A Critical Condition', in *Stigma: The Experience of Disability*, ed. Paul Hunt (Geoffrey Chapman, 1966), 156.

incarnation opens up the possibility of considering Christ as disabled, as he shows the reality of human mortality and fragility. Thomas Reynolds, whose disability theology is heavily influenced by Moltmann, argues that "tragedy is the price paid for existence," a perspective that allows one to stop the temptation to treat disability as a question of theodicy.[362] Vulnerability, mortality, and disability are simply facts of the world rather than signs of disorder. The struggle identified in Moltmann, on whether to consider death as natural or a result of sin, mirrors the challenge of the status of disability that was explored in Chapter One (pp.20-22). If disability focuses solely on the social causes, which could be interpreted as sin, there is the risk of not acknowledging the pain of impairments, and the reality that many disabled people's lives have underlying health issues that will impact their mortality. The painful parts of disability could be understood as natural, but Moltmann allows for one to acknowledge the pain of the current reality, while refusing to call it natural, so that the pain of the moment need not be accepted as final. It is an acknowledgment of that sense of yearning for the contradiction that comes with the eschaton.

By drawing a connection between Christ taking on the transience of creation and disability, one might suggest that disabled people are an embodied reminder that nothing in the world is permanent. Hunt suggests that the role of disabled people is to remind others of life's tragedies, and "yet show by our lives that we believe this is not the final tragedy."[363] Similarly, some disability theologians, like Frances Young, have argued that disability "provides a constant living parable of human frailty, but also of its potential transcendence through the grace of God."[364] Disability is understood as prophetic, in how it creates a judgment, or *krisis,* revealing the ableist values of others and of society.[365] There is an inherent challenge in this approach, which is that it focuses on how disabled people are constructed as those who do not fit in with the norms of society.[366] Disability may not be being used to say that something has gone wrong in creation, but it is still being identified with this sense of futility in the world. While transience is not unique to people with disabilities, the problem is that, when they are identified as representatives of the transience of the world, their embodiment becomes the

[362] Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 5.
[363] Hunt, 'A Critical Condition', 156.
[364] Young, *Face to Face*, 144.
[365] Cf. Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 173.; Cf. Young, *Face to Face*, 143; Cf. Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome*, 188.
[366] It should be noted that Brock does not make the same mistake as he also sees the importance of speaking about human flourishing. He has questioned the language that Frances Young has used, such as "tragic," "bad luck," "series of losses," and "damaged persons," to describe her disabled son. Cf. Leidenhag, 'Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship', 212; cf. Brian Brock, 'Symposium on Wondrously Wounded by Brian Brock', Response to Frances Young, 30 September 2020, https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/wondrously-wounded/.

primary site of fragility. In viewing Christ as identifying not only with the circumstances of enslaved people, but with the enslaved nature, it continues the suggestion that the current moment cannot be loved and needs healing. One of the problems that Joanna Leidenhag identifies with the prophetic vision is that it centres on human suffering and continues to see disabled people as signs "of (only) lack, impairment, dependency and vulnerability."[367] The current moment is not perfect or complete. However, one cannot wait until the end to affirm the goodness of creation. Being in relationship involves vulnerability, but the fleshy dimension of that vulnerability requires greater articulation by Moltmann. The physical vulnerability that Moltmann gives the most attention to is the cross. Therefore, it is necessary to consider how Moltmann views the suffering on the cross, and so the next chapter will consider Christ's suffering on the cross.

3.2. The Knowledge of Christ and Intellectual Disabilities

3.2.1. Aquinas and the Intellectual Perfection of Christ

Having examined Christ's embodiment through the lens of physical disability, the discussion now turns to his human intellect. Christ's intellect raises a different set of questions, particularly whether theological accounts presume a kind of compulsory intellectual able-bodiedness. In considering how Christ might relate to people with intellectual disabilities, it is easy to assume that they are diametrically opposed. For Christ to be understood as worthy of worship, it might seem necessary to assume he did not have an intellectual disability, since such a suggestion would appear to make Christ irrational; a madman as opposed to the Son of God. As stated at the outset, the focus of this work is not to diagnose Christ with a disability, but to question the normative values of Christology and how they impact people with disabilities. At the same time, there is a need to question the hesitancy to allow a connection between Christ and intellectual disabilities. What appears to be at stake is the agency and intentionality of Christ. However, it needs to be asked whether this is a fair understanding of intellectual disabilities because it presumes that people with an intellectual disability lack agency and intentionality and thus embodies the kind of humanity that many Christologies seek to avoid.

To approach this question fairly requires first recognising how intellectual disability itself is interpreted and valued. First, it must be acknowledged that with some intellectual

[367] Leidenhag, 'Autism, Doxology, and the Nature of Christian Worship', 212–13.

disabilities, particularly if they are nonverbal, it is not the disabled individuals who are interpreting their own experiences, rather, their experiences are often mediated through other people's interpretations. This leads to the second point which is that depending on how one values intelligence and depending on one's exposure to disabled people, this will impact how one interprets people with intellectual disabilities. In the previous chapter, it was mentioned that Singer understood some animals as having a greater capacity for self-awareness than some people with disabilities, as part of his reasoning for animal rights. In response, Eva Feder Kittay, who is the mother of a child with an intellectual disability, challenges the claim that figures like Singer and Jeff McMahan are more objective than her because they are not influenced by emotions, yet they fail to acknowledge their limits. Kittay writes that while she does not know what cognitive capacities her daughter has, she finds that she is surprised to discover that her daughter has understood something or can do something that she did not expect. She acknowledges the limits of her knowledge and argues that it is necessary to appreciate that a huge part of the problem is that the treatment of disabled people is based on their presumed limitations.[368] Singer represents an extreme example, yet a similar normative presumption persists more broadly, not always explicitly articulated, that it is better to be intelligent and that people with severe cognitive disabilities are to be pitied. Kittay draws attention to how inattentiveness leads to a failure to recognise people's capabilities. Therefore, in speaking of intellectual disabilities, there is a need to be cognisant of one's limitations and what one is valuing.

It has already been identified that Aquinas is only willing to give Christ certain defects, and one of the crucial stipulations is that they do not impact Christ's soteriological mission. *Prima facie,* this would suggest that for Christ to have any intellectual disabilities, or to use Aquinas's language intellectual defects, must be rejected because they would impact Christ's mission and potentially undermine his agency. This not only has consequences for his role as saviour, but also for his role as teacher. According to Aquinas, Christ possesses a human intellect, and it is subject to the limits of his human nature. Due to his commitment to the hypostatic union, Davies describes Aquinas performing a "delicate balancing act" to avoid the knowledge of either nature being compromised.[369] The knowledge of Christ is viewed as following the Chalcedonian formula, in that "the uncreated remained uncreated, and the created remained within the limits of the creature".[370] The challenge that emerges is how the knowledge

[368] Cf. Eva Feder Kittay, 'The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political: A Philosopher and Mother of a Cognitively Disabled Person Sends Notes from the Battlefield', *Metaphilosophy* 40, nos 3–4 (2009): 618–19.
[369] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 301.
[370] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.10.1.

of these two natures can co-exist in one person. One might expect that the infinite nature of divine knowledge would completely overwhelm the human knowledge. Aquinas would disagree with this framing because it would be analogous to imagining the knowledge of each nature as being two liquids poured into the same bowl. This goes against the Chalcedonian formula as it implies a mixture of natures. Therefore, Christ's human nature needs that distinction in order to affirm that the knowledge of Christ's human nature was also limited due to the kind of nature he possessed. Otherwise, one would have to adopt a kenotic approach to Christ's divine knowledge. While limited, this human knowledge is understood to be perfect. Aquinas differentiates between three types of knowledge that Christ is understood to possess: beatific knowledge; infused knowledge; and acquired knowledge.

To begin with beatific knowledge or the beatific vision, it means that Christ has direct knowledge of God, rather than through a veil like the rest of humanity. However, Christ cannot be said to grasp God's essence as a human. According to Aquinas, Christ can see God but is unable to comprehend God in his entirety.[371] Being unable to comprehend is not understood to be a failure of the human person, but a recognition that, while one could have exhaustive knowledge about a particular thing, God is not a thing. The infinite nature of God means only a divine intellect could truly know him.[372] It is a supernatural knowledge, but it follows Aquinas's view of grace, where grace is understood to perfect nature, not destroy it. This principle can be seen in the way that the beatific vision respects the limits of human nature. Christ is understood to have experienced grace fully, and therefore, his vision of God was to the "supreme degree".[373] Thomas Joseph White argues that it is necessary that Christ's humanity possesses this knowledge of God in order to for Christ's human will to cooperate with the divine will. Without beatific vision, Christ would not have possessed certainty that he was following the divine will.[374] As Simon Francis Gaine argues, Aquinas could only accept that Christ possessed a defect if there was a soteriological reason, but when it comes to grace a necessary aspect of salvation, it is clear that Christ needed grace and therefore, he could not lack knowledge of God.[375]

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[371] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.10.1.
[372] Cf. Simon Francis Gaine, *Did the Saviour See the Father? Christ, Salvation and the Vision of God* (Bloomsbury, 2015), 93–94.
[373] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.9.2.
[374] Cf. Thomas Joseph White, *The Incarnate Lord: A Thomistic Study in Christology* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2017), 254.
[375] Cf. Simon Francis Gaine, 'Christ's Acquired Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas: How Aquinas's Philosophy Helped and Hindered His Account', *New Blackfriars* 96, no. 1063 (2015): 260.

In understanding Christ as possessing beatific vision, it must be emphasised that there is a respect for human nature. Christ has unmediated knowledge of God in his human nature; however, he does not comprehend the essence of God. It almost appears to be a denial of Christ understanding himself as God. Yet, it does not mean that Christ does not recognise that he is God but that his knowledge of God has limits due to his human nature. Beatific vision is beyond the grasp of humans in the present life; however, at the eschaton, it is worth noting that beatific vision does not destroy human limits. When humans see God unmediated at the end of time, they will still not comprehend him fully. Beatific vision is not achieved by natural reason, according to Aquinas, rather it is given by grace.[376] It is impossible for a created intellect to know "God in an infinite degree" but Aquinas understands the comprehending that comes with beatific vision as meaning that one has attained God and will not let him go, he is the fulfilment of human desire.[377] Because one cannot fully comprehend God, these limits are not antithetical to resurrected humanity, even as one receives God completely. Since the beatific vision is not the result of human knowledge, it also means that there is no requirement to be of a high intellect to know God. Aquinas understands the human person as having a natural desire "to know everything to the perfection of the intellect" but upon seeing God, though one cannot know everything, one would be fulfilled.[378] Beatific vision is not the end of one's humanity. However, there are two challenges that come with the beatific vision when it comes to Christ specifically. First, how can it co-exist with his divine nature? Second, how can Christ possess beatific vision and experience the suffering of the cross? This second question will be explored in the next chapter. Taken together, these features of Aquinas's account indicate two central difficulties, which become especially clear when viewed from a disability perspective.

Having outlined Aquinas's account of Christ's beatific vision, it is now possible to draw some preliminary observations about how his understanding of intellect and perfection shapes the treatment of human limitation. From a disability perspective, two challenges arise. The first is whether Aquinas creates a problem by arguing that Christ possesses both a human and a divine intellect and will, and the second is whether his insistence that Christ's human intellect must be perfect creates difficulties for relating Christ to people with intellectual disabilities. The idea that Christ has two wills or intellects can appear to suggest that Christ is two persons. It is difficult to imagine that there can be a sense of unity, particularly when,

[376] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.12.12.
[377] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.12.7.
[378] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.12.7.

according to his divine nature, he knows everything, while at the same time, according to his human nature, his knowledge has limits.

One way to imagine the co-existence of Christ's two natures is to imagine them as two different capacities. Eleonore Stump offers several cases to help envision how the created and uncreated can co-exist without mixing. One useful example is the experience of agnosia, a condition where one cannot identify an object through a particular sense despite that sense working normally. For example, visual agnosia means that one can see but not recognise a particular object using one's sight, even having identified it using a different sense, such as touch. This illustrates how one may perceive through different capacities without confusion, in a way loosely analogous to Christ's two modes of knowing. A crucial aspect to this image for Stump is that there is no conflation between capacities.[379] Although this analogy risks a lack or deficit, it underscores that Christ assumes not only physical limits but limits on his intellect. These limits are not negative but expressive of genuine humanity. Maintaining the distinction between Christ's natures allows human nature to be embraced without the suggestion it becoming an entirely new nature. Stump's use of agnosia is a helpful illustration, though ultimately it remains difficult to comprehend the mind of Christ. Therefore, rather than attempting to reconcile Christ's human and divine intellects to come together as if they were a jigsaw puzzle, it is much more fruitful to ask what the consequences are from refusing to keep the two natures as distinct from each other.

To address this question, it must be considered that Christ's lacking a human intellect or will has significant implications. It suggests that he lacks something essential to his humanity. There is an important distinction between saying that there is no demonstration of human intellect and lacking human intellect. If there are aspects of Christ's humanity that one would expect to find, particularly non-visible aspects such as intellect, then they have to be presumed. Otherwise, it risks suggesting that his divinity fills those gaps. This creates a Christological problem, as it implies that Christ did not become fully human. It also creates a problem for a disability Christology, since it repeats the logic of the medical model of disability: identifying a lack in the human person and positing a cure to overcome it.

[379] Cf. Eleonore Stump, *Aquinas* (Routledge, 2003), 419–20.

While Aquinas does use the term instrument several times to describe Christ's humanity, this does not mean that his humanity should be regarded as a puppet or an axe, where they are directed externally. Such examples imply separation, whereas Aquinas account describes Christ's humanity a "cojoined instrument," like God's hand.[380] This image makes clear that Christ's humanity cannot be understood without reference to the agent and therefore, conveys intimacy between the two. Moreover, Aquinas's account stresses that instrument is moved solely by the agent, but also "according to the property of its nature." An inanimate tool like an axe can only be moved by another, but Aquinas writes that for "an instrument with a rational soul is moved by it will," like a servant is moved by its master.[381] On one level, this language risks treating the body as inferior, something to be commanded, thus, retaining some of the dualistic problems observed in Chapter One (p.17). Yet on another level, Aquinas by arguing that the will of Christ's humanity also moves him means he is respecting human nature. Aquinas writes that "When we say, 'to will in a certain way,' we signify a determinate mode of willing. Now a determinate mode regards the thing of which it is the mode. Hence since the will pertains to the nature, 'to will in a certain way' belongs to the nature".[382] Therefore, Christ acts not merely as a divine being but also acts with a human nature respecting the limits of that nature. The question that arises which is how the limits that belong to human nature relate to the perfection Aquinas attributes to Christ's humanity.

It is one thing to argue that Christ's humanity must include a will and intellect; it is another to declare, as Aquinas does, that they must be perfect. This raises the question: if perfection is required to avoid defect, does this imply people with intellectual disabilities are inferior? The perfection of Christ's intellect is viewed by Aquinas as providing certainty in his soteriological mission. Gaine explains that this is why Aquinas describes Christ as possessing beatific vision rather than faith: with faith alone, he would not have had "certainty of the divine will."[383] Similarly, White notes that without the beatific vision, Christ as human would act only on belief rather than knowledge of the divine will.[384] The perfection of his intellect, expressed through the beatific vision, allows Christ to act with a certainty that no one else on this side of the eschaton can share. Aquinas connects this perfection to the hypostatic union, by which Christ's human soul receiving habitual grace fully. He writes that "the nearer any recipient is to

[380] Aquinas, *SCG*, 4.41.11.
[381] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.18.1.
[382] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.18.4.
[383] Simon Francis Gaine, 'Must an Incarnate Divine Person Enjoy the Beatific Vision?', in *Thomas Aquinas and the Crisis of Christology*, ed. Michael A. Dauphinais et al. (Sapientia Press, 2021), 132–33.
[384] Cf. White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 266.

an inflowing cause, the more it partake[s] of its influence."[385] By habitual grace, Aquinas means God's continual movement within the human person "to will and to act," strengthening the person interiorly.[386] Because Christ is both God and human in one person, his human nature is as close as possible to the source of inflowing grace.

Yet, grace cannot be equated with knowledge, nor can one assume that those who possess great knowledge have received more grace. Aquinas differentiates between wisdom, *scientia*, and understanding (*intellectus)*, but none of them are enough to make someone a good person, since they can be misused. What is needed is the virtue of prudence to make the correct judgment.[387] This suggests that perfection need not centre on the amount that one knows but the function of that knowledge. Interpreters have highlighted that Aquinas's account of knowledge cannot be reduced to cognitive capacity. Davies writes that "Aquinas does not mean that we are necessarily virtuous because we are clever… But he does think when willing correctly (having a good will, aiming at what is good) we can be aided at the level of understanding or intellect".[388] Character and values are important as, possibly even more important than, intelligence. In this sense, while Aquinas may present Christ as a kind of genius, the emphasis should not be on everything Christ knows, but on the normative values that Christ reveals and lives. Perfection is primarily a statement of his goodness rather than of genius.

The next kind of knowledge that needs to be examined is infused knowledge. Aquinas writes that this means Christ "had innate knowledge of the essences of things."[389] This infused knowledge was complete; therefore, he did not need to engage in any inquiries. It was habitual, and he could exercise it at will.[390] This knowledge arose from the union of Christ's humanity with the Word, through which intelligible species are imprinted on his human soul.[391] By intelligible species, Aquinas refers to the universal form abstracted from the particular that is found in the world.[392] While this capacity is shared by humanity in general, according to Aquinas, what is distinct is that Christ possesses both the innateness and the scope of this capacity. When it comes to the rest of humanity, infused knowledge is only acquired by "the

[385] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.7.1.
[386] Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.110.2.
[387] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.57.1; 1-2.57.4.
[388] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 192.
[389] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 302–3.
[390] Cf. Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 302–3.
[391] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.9.3.
[392] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.85.1.

souls of the blessed".[393] One of the major questions for Aquinas, then, is what purpose infused knowledge serves and what does it contribute to one's understanding of Christ's human knowledge beyond beatific vision.

To explore the purpose of infused knowledge, it is necessary to consider how it differs from the beatific vision. Beatific vision concerns Christ's direct knowledge of God, whereas infused knowledge appears to focus on the world. Yet it is not immediately clear whether this is necessary, given that Aquinas also understands Christ as acquiring knowledge. For Aquinas, one reason for attributing infused knowledge is his conviction that Christ's human nature is to be perfect.[394] It is intended to ensure that Christ is not understood to be lacking. Christ possesses the intelligible species of everything to ensure the perfection of his humanity. A second justification Aquinas offers is ignorance could undermine his mission and teaching. What immediately becomes apparent with both these justifications is that they share the same rational as beatific vision. Yet this raises a further question, whether extensive knowledge of the world is needed for salvation.

Gaine offers a different rationale for Christ's infused knowledge, which is that it is used to make the beatific vision expressible, a power to translate the ineffable. Therefore, it makes the teaching of Christ possible.[395] Joshua Lim, however, points out that arguments that link infused knowledge to Christ's teaching go further than what Aquinas writes and depend on later interpreters.[396] Lim contends that such readings overlook that Christ is the source of all grace.[397] Aquinas writes that Christ would know even how many pebbles are in a particular river because "*any lack of knowledge* whatever would have been a defect which hindered the redemption of the human race."[398] Lim notes that ignorance is not a mark of sin, therefore, the rest of humanity's lack of complete knowledge is not itself sinful.[399] Since Christ's humanity is the recipient of the fullness of grace, he must receive "all the effects of grace".[400] Therefore, Lim argues that infused knowledge is to be understood in the context of perfecting human nature, rather than destroying it. It is part of the elevation of human nature; Christ needed it so the rest

[393] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.11.3.
[394] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.9.3.
[395] Cf. Simon Francis Gaine, 'Is There Still a Place For Christ's Infused Knowledge in Catholic Theology and Exegesis?', *Nova et Vetera* 16, no. 2 (2018): 607–8.
[396] Cf. Joshua H. Lim, '"An Encyclopedic Pico Della Mirandola"? Rethinking Aquinas on Christ's Infused Knowledge', *Nova et Vetera* 21, no. 1 (2023): 150.
[397] Cf. Lim, '"An Encyclopedic Pico Della Mirandola"?', 151.
[398] Aquinas, *De Ver.*, 20.4. Emphasis added.
[399] Cf. Lim, '"An Encyclopedic Pico Della Mirandola"?', 163.
[400] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.7.9.

of humanity might share in it.[401] It is not a necessary part of humanity, but it is necessary for salvation.

Aquinas seeks to uphold the intellect of Christ's human nature as distinct from divine omniscience, yet he faces the difficulty that Christ's unique role seems to require perfection. The language of fullness and completeness evokes the image of Christ's humanity as a container, filled entirely with intellect and grace. The issue, however, is not with the idea of Christ being complete but whether Aquinas sufficiently appreciates the limits of the container. The metaphor is somewhat crude, since it makes the limits of human nature appear quite definite. The limits of humanity should not be treated as precisely known and absolute, though they must still be recognised as real. One might therefore ask whether it is necessary for Christ to possess the amount of knowledge attributed by Aquinas. Gaine's interpretation helps to reframe the issue by shifting the focus from the quantity of Christ's knowledge to its communicative task: rendering the beatific vision intelligible within human understanding. This avoids questions such as how much Christ's humanity should know and instead highlights that the act of translation is about having perfect fluency in the "language" of human nature. As Rowan Williams, writing on Aquinas's Christology, points out that Christ's life must be in "a non-divine medium" and nothing can be left untranslated for it to be a successful translation.[402] The infused knowledge becomes the skill to translate through the grammar and limits of human understanding. Translation requires a deep knowledge of the language, yet it also recognises that certain terms have no direct equivalent; likewise, Christ's human knowledge operates within the structures of humanity. Aquinas's approach risks equating Christ's perfection with cognitive capacity, whereas, as Hans Urs von Balthasar observes, Christ's perfect humanity is not about "straining man's nature toward the super-human… He will have to be a man like everyone else because he will be a man for everyone, and he will exhibit his uniqueness precisely through his ordinariness."[403] Balthasar raises this point in the context of revelation in concealment, yet it offers a useful reminder: Christ's uniqueness is not in surpassing human limitation but in fully inhabiting it.

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[401] Cf. Lim, '"An Encyclopedic Pico Della Mirandola"?', 172.
[402] Rowan Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation* (Bloomsbury, 2018), 32–33. It should be noted that Williams is not referring to infused knowledge directly but the relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity.
[403] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Seeing the Form*, 1 of The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, trans. Ermo Leiva-Merikakis (Ignatius, 1989), 457.

Having considered what Christ knows due to his union with God, it is necessary to turn to what he knows by virtue of his humanity: his acquired knowledge. [404] Christ did not only possess knowledge but was also capable of learning. At first glance, the suggestion that Christ could acquire knowledge would appear to imply his knowledge is incomplete or lacking, and therefore, imperfect. Aquinas, however, argues that Christ acquired knowledge from his senses.[405] To deny this capacity, he maintains, would suggest that God created the human ability to abstract knowledge from sense data vain. To avoid the idea of futility, Aquinas insists Christ possessed an active intellect.[406] Christ's beatific vision and infused knowledge are understood to be a result of grace, whereas acquired knowledge arises from Christ's human will and natural faculties. The growth in Christ's acquired knowledge is not seen as a deficiency, but it is recognised to be an appropriate expression of human development. Aquinas explains that Christ did not receive the fullness of acquired knowledge at once, but "step by step, and after a time, i.e. in His perfect age; and this is plain from what the Evangelist says, viz. that He increased in 'knowledge and age' together."[407] While this view might introduce normative assumptions about intellectual progress, it can partly be set aside given Christ's unique position. The critical point is that in arguing that Christ acquires knowledge, Aquinas provides a way to speak of Christ's human intellect that allows him to learn just like the rest of humanity.

There are a number of questions that arise from Aquinas's view of Christ's acquired knowledge, combining conceptual tensions within Aquinas's theology with issues that become particularly salient from a disability perspective. The first challenge is how to understand Christ's acquired knowledge in relation to his infused and beatific knowledge. At first glance, it appears redundant, serving no purpose except to affirm the reality of Christ's human nature. Yet the acquisition of knowledge does not imply a deficit in the person, nor does it mean that Christ is imperfect. Gaines observes that there are two senses of perfection that Aquinas uses in relation to Christ's acquired intellect. The first is absolute perfection, referring to the intellect's possession of all it can know. The second is a relative perfection, meaning that Christ's intellect was "perfect relative to that particular time and its conditions."[408] This conditionality shifts the focus away from a supposed lack of knowledge to the conditions of his human perfection. Christ has limits and is perfect; these attributes are not antithetical to one another. Unlike

[404] Aquinas was unusual among his medieval counterparts to argue that Christ acquired knowledge. In his earlier writing in the *Sentences* held the view that Christ did not acquire knowledge, however, the distinction between the active and passive intellect resulted in him changing his mind.
[405] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.9.4.
[406] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.9.4.
[407] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.12.2.
[408] Gaine, 'Christ's Acquired Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas', 266.

infused and beatific knowledge, acquired knowledge arises from Christ's senses, rather than from grace. What distinguishes it is not the content of knowledge but how he attains it. It is the embodied way of achieving the knowledge that is new. Such an understanding avoids the suggestion that the incarnation was a result of a lack in God; instead, it highlights that divine self-revelation embraces the conditions of human limits. Furthermore, from a disability perspective, this is important because it does not frame dependence, growth, and sensory engagement as imperfections but can be part of Christ's life.

At this point in the analysis, a further challenge emerges. This time concerning the normative implications: the emphasis Aquinas places on Christ's knowledge risks creating normative values around cognition. The idea that Christ can attain knowledge from his senses can be read as an affirmation of the body, recognising that human knowing is not an abstract but contextual and embodied. However, this is not how Aquinas develops it. For Aquinas, sense data must be abstracted in order to discern what the universal forms are.[409] As Davies characterises Aquinas position, "our minds must be able to deal with sensory input so as to form concepts."[410] In this framework, material objects require interpretation through an active intellect, rather than being interpreted passively. From a disability perspective, this model of the intellect is problematic. People with intellectual disabilities who do not use language would appear, under this framework, to possess an inferior intellect. The caveat, of course, it that it is impossible to know fully what is understood by those who are nonverbal. Yet this uncertainty does not prevent hierarchies emerging out of Aquinas's approach. A particular challenge is Aquinas's view that it is better to acquire knowledge from one's own discovery rather than being taught by another. This leads him to argue that Christ did not learn from other humans or angels.[411] There is a valuing of independence that risks sidelining interdependence, a reality essential not only to disabled people but to the fullness of human life itself.

In arguing that it is better to learn from oneself rather than another, Aquinas risks undermining the value of his position that Christ acquires knowledge. This claim not only emphasises the importance of the human intellect but also prioritises human independence. Gaines suggests that this does not mean that Christ cannot be thought of as learning from others, but that because of his perfect *scientia,* he was always "a step ahead" of teachers, which

[409] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.79.3.
[410] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 136.
[411] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.12.3-4.

would not make him any less human.[412] While this concession helps to make Christ appear more like the rest of humanity, it still stresses his independence rather than his interdependence. It permits others to teach Christ, but he retains his superiority. The question, then, is whether this sufficiently protects Christ from the accusation that he is merely going through the motions of intellectual growth. To describe Christ as intelligent is not problematic; what is problematic is neglecting the contributions of others. Disability theologians have repeatedly challenged the idea that independence is the norm of human flourishing. As Kenny argues, "Our bodies are not self-sufficient. We cannot rely solely on ourselves. We must become interdependent to thrive."[413] This insight extends beyond physical embodiment to cognition. One relies on others both physically and intellectually. In this light, Christ's acquisition of knowledge might be better understood not as a solitary act of intellectual mastery but as a participation of the interdependence that constitutes human knowing.

The difficulty, however, is that such interdependence challenges Aquinas's underlying assumptions about Christ's role and identity. Aquinas's reluctance to suggest that Christ learns from others stems from Christ's unique position as a teacher, the self-revelation of God, and the saviour of the world. All these roles appear to require perfect knowledge. As previously mentioned, Aquinas argues that Christ cannot have any defects that would impact his soteriology, which is why he is much more willing to allow physical defects than intellectual limitations. Yet the idea that Christ acquired knowledge incrementally as he aged means that learning need not be interpreted as filling a prior lack. The source of that new knowledge does not have to be himself. One could view Christ as being dependent on sense data as well as others and yet Aquinas accepts only the former. Embodied knowledge does not emerge from nowhere; it can arise through other people. Christ may have had an exceptional human mind, but this need not mean that he was an independent genius. Even Christ required support. The real difficulty is that introduces a greater sense of contingency, which could undermine Christ's mission. One way to affirm learning without implying defect is to distinguish between different kinds of causality. God can be understood as the ultimate cause of what others do that inspire Christ, while humans are the secondary cause who produce the effect in Christ. In this way, Christ learning can be seen as a recognition, through his humanity of God revealed in others. This corresponds to who he is as the Word, yet it allows him in his humanity to genuinely learn. It might be regarded as another variation of Gaine's suggestion that Christ is always a step ahead of his teachers, but it differs in one crucial respect: Christ does not cause the effect on

[412] Gaine, 'Christ's Acquired Knowledge According to Thomas Aquinas', 264.
[413] Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, ch. 4.

others with his human nature, but his divine nature. Such a distinction preserves the integrity of his human intellect, while also recognising the genuine contribution of others.

3.2.2. Moltmann and Christ's Dependency on Others

To turn towards Moltmann's approach to Christ's intellect, it should first be noted that this is not an area that he writes about extensively, particularly as a topic in its own right. His account, insofar as it can be reconstructed, flows from the social Christology that has already been outlined. As a result, Moltmann rejects any suggestion that Christ's knowledge can be regarded as a fixed list of pre-existing facts. The social approach offers potential resources for a disability Christology that seeks to challenge compulsory intellectual able-bodiedness. A challenge that was identified in Aquinas's Christology was his emphasis on the value of independent learning which risks undermining the contingency of Christ; therefore, Moltmann's social approach allows for a much more interdependent understanding of Christ's intellect. Christ not only learns from the other persons of the Trinity but, radically, he also argues that Christ learns from the poor with whom he lived with. Moltmann argues that Christ "discovers the kingdom of God among the poor."[414] It has the potential to undo the suggestion of a hierarchy, with Christ on top as the independent genius and those with intellectual disabilities who need support at the bottom and instead recognise a general interdependence.

This emphasis on interdependence is also evident in Moltmann's general conception of knowledge. For Moltmann, learning is intrinsically transformative, he writes that the knower is "transformed through sympathy, becoming a participator in what he perceives. Knowledge confers fellowship. That is why knowing, perception, only goes as far as love, sympathy and participation reach."[415] He therefore rejects any suggestion that it is just the acquisition of information. This is not entirely new, Aquinas also argued that knowledge is not merely abstract information, but Moltmann goes further by insisting the transformation is not limited to the human person; it is also true of the divine. For Moltmann, to truly know someone is to love someone and therefore, to be part of a constant mutual transformation. This approach radically shifts how one understands the knowledge of Christ.

[414] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 102.
[415] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 9.

From this standpoint, Christ's knowledge and message are inseparable. Christ has come in love, to show love and to bring people towards a loving reconciliation of the world with God and one another. Because Moltmann does not draw a sharp distinction between the economic and immanent Trinity, what happens in the life of Christ reveals the inner life of the Trinity and this means that the sacrificial love of God revealed by Christ cannot be reduced to simply Christ's humanity but also expresses the eternal nature of God.[416] Moltmann describes this innocent suffering love as meaning that "anyone one loves cannot look on at the other person's suffering any longer – he wants to overcome it. So his love suffers with the suffer of the other".[417] Applied to the incarnation, it means that what is required of Christ intellectually is an openness and deep investment in their lives and suffering with them. The importance is on the strength of his relationships with the other Triune persons and with creation. This approach clarifies that what is being valued is less a store of information than a disposition and a way of action. Christ as unique person is defined more by his relationship with the Father and the Spirit than anything he possesses as a human.

Having outlined Moltmann's relational epistemology, it is now possible to consider its normative implications, particularly for people with intellectual disabilities. Moltmann's understanding of love presupposes that one seeks another person and is involved in the lives of others in mutual, active relationship with others. People with severe intellectual disabilities are often dismissed by others, their limits are assumed to be so extreme that they lack much of a capacity to think or act. This involvement in the lives of others often presumes participation in efforts toward ending injustice. The challenge is whether this prevents some disabled people from being meaningfully involved in the lives of others. Swinton is critical of the social model and liberative method, because as the mantra "nothing about us without us" illustrates, it presumes "autonomy, self-representation, participation in the political process, shared decision-making" which some disabled individuals cannot achieve or only with great difficulty.[418] Moltmann's Christology is directed towards the poor and other marginalised groups, arguing that Christ gives them a new dignity which confronts the exploitative values by saying that they are God's first children and is in solidarity with them. Present injustices are not solved by offering them wealth, because Moltmann sees that as inherently violent, but it "puts them on the way to community which… is determined by 'the culture of sharing'".[419] Throughout his work, there is a constant call for justice and therefore, one could ask whether Moltmann risks creating

[416] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 32.
[417] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 51–52.
[418] John Swinton, 'Symposium on Becoming Friends of Time', Response to Adam McInturf, 19 June 2017, https://syndicate.network/symposia/theology/becoming-friends-time/.
[419] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 101–2.

a liberative approach that continues to exclude people with profound intellectual disabilities from following Christ.

It is often the assumption that meaningful action must be large scale or publicly visible, but it should not be assumed that they are the only kinds of actions that matter. Graham Adams argues that smallness can "express the deepest attentiveness to situations" and that one of the problems with greatness is that it "can be too focused on the big picture to notice the hidden stories."[420] This emphasis on the value of the small resonates with Kittay's concern that non-disabled people do not pay adequate attention to people with intellectual disabilities. Disabled people's lives are perceived as being small and passive, therefore, they are easy to dismiss. Yet, Kittay observes two intellectually disabled individuals' experiences of grief after having been told of their fathers' death. One began crying immediately, whereas the other waited till after his family had left. In their different responses, Kittay writes that it was clear that they understood the concept of death and had formed "profound attachments."[421] These responses challenge the assumption of passivity, revealing instead the depth of their relationships.

Even if they may not articulate a desire to make things better, their responses clearly show they are affected and of love. Like any individual, a person with a severe intellectual disability has limits to what they can do, and this includes how they can respond, but they are able to love, care, and pay attention to those who are with them. It is easy to overlook the gift of one's presence but the act of being with someone can be impactful even if one only sits side by side. Taken together, these examples illuminate a form of relational presence that aligns closely with Moltmann's understanding of love as the capacity to be affected by and be responsive to others. Moltmann's understanding of love allows for a variety of responses that centre on one's ability to love and be affected by the ones that they love. Disabled people are involved with others, the problem is that others do not always recognise or appreciate this involvement. Recognising this relational understanding of knowledge shifts the focus away from imagining Christ as a lone genius and toward what is crucial, being attentive to one another, rather than meeting normative expectations of intellectual competence.

Moltmann's treatment of Christ offers several useful insights from the perspective of intellectual disabilities. The first insight is that knowledge is not a solitary enterprise; rather, for

[420] Graham Adams, *God the Child: Small, Weak and Curious Subversions* (SCM Press, 2024), 29.
[421] Kittay, 'The Personal Is Philosophical Is Political', 617.

Moltmann, solitary knowing is seen as the opposite of what Moltmann sees as being true knowledge. In understanding Christ as being led by the Spirit, Moltmann makes clear that Christ does not need to be thought of as possessing all of the knowledge. Others, particularly the Spirit, are understood to help Christ in such a way that does not require him to overcome his limits. The Spirit guides Christ, helping him grow into his role. This is a clear contrast with Aquinas who understands Christ as acquiring knowledge on his own. For Aquinas, the difficulty with Christ learning from others is that it suggests that Christ's authority would be undermined if he accepted the help of others. Moltmann, by contrast, understands Christ as learning his messianic identity through his relationships with others, which means that Christ need not be conceived as self-sufficient.

As a result, this leads to the second important contribution: a Christology that is less hierarchical and more collaborative. Christ is not expected to possess maximal human knowledge, what matters is his relational connectedness. Moltmann's conception of knowledge involves transformation through knowing and loving others, which means that others are needed for knowledge to occur. There is no singular source for knowledge. Moltmann clearly views Christ as unique through his relationship with the Father, while at the same time keeping the distance between Christ and the rest of humanity relatively small. Another notable aspect with significance for people with intellectual disabilities is that this approach ensures that the focus is not on intellectual mastery or exceptional cognitive ability. Instead, it centres on loving others. In valuing relational presence over intellectual mastery, Moltmann's approach has clear implications for disability. This relational account is not without its problems. For example, it may unintentionally create a new form of exclusionary knowledge, which will be examined in further depth in the final chapter.

Moltmann's relational epistemology has potential for disability theology in the way it challenges the normative expectations of Christ through its emphasis on interdependence. Yet to understand this fully, it is necessary to situate it in his broader Christology, particularly, his account of divine self-limitation. Although Moltmann rarely treats Christ's intellect directly, one can still discern an account of it throughout his work, even if only indirectly. In contrast with Aquinas, whose account of Christ's knowledge includes beatific vision, Moltmann does not operate with these categories. Because he emphasises relationship over cognition, concentrating on what Christ knows would mean directing attention to the wrong place. Moltmann's broader theology of divine self-limitation, where he makes space for the Other, further discourages any attempt to describe Christ's intellect as fixed. These limits, for

Moltmann, include divine knowledge. He writes that "God does not know everything in advance because he does not will to know everything in advance. He waits for the response of those he has created, and lets their future come".[422] The future is, for Moltmann, open to new possibilities, which are not an inevitable part of time but an interruption by God. Therefore, while there is a sense that God knows the ending, Moltmann insists that God has accepted the limits of knowledge out of respect for the freedom of creation. This has Christological implications, pointing toward the way Christ's intellect participates in the same self-limiting posture that characterises God's relation to creation, expressed both in God relation to creation and in the incarnation itself.

With the incarnation, Moltmann understands Christ as having accepted human limits. He writes that "God in the person of the Son enters into the limited, finite situation of man. Not only does he enter into it, descend into it, but he also accepts it and embraces the whole of human existence with his being."[423] Because Moltmann's approach to the communication of idioms does not require maintaining a strong distinction between the two natures, there is no need to treat Christ's *human* intellect separately. In writing that Christ embraces the whole of human existence, Moltmann shows that there is a difference between the limits prior to the incarnation and those he assumes. Christ is not simply God with divine limits in human form but is fully human. This implies that Christ has a human intellect and will because he cannot be said to be missing anything. Moltmann emphasises Christ's ability to learn and the process of becoming. Christ's messiahship is not understood by Moltmann as something that exists already; it is discovered through his relationships with others.[424] Moltmann argues that the messianic secret was not only a secret for others but was also a secret for Christ himself since this kept his future open, rather than preconceived by the expectations of what it means to be messiah. Moltmann describes Christ growing into his position, being impacted by what he experiences. The titles are suspended, because Christ's history determines the meaning of these titles, so they can only be fully understood at the beginning of the new creation.[425] In his writing on the cross, he makes clear that Christ does know that he is the Son of God and therefore, there is no suggestion that Christ is not the Son.[426] But the challenge is that while Moltmann wants to have an understanding of Christ that stresses the unity of Christ, he also argues that adoptionism

[422] Jürgen Moltmann, 'God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World', in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 148.
[423] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 285.
[424] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 102.
[425] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 138–39.
[426] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 167.

and pre-existence Christology are not in conflict with each other.[427] Following Moltmann's approach allows Christ to learn from others rather than be self-sufficient. but the question remains whether he adequately unites Jesus of Nazareth and the Word.

For Moltmann, Christ's identity and understanding are shaped through his relationships with both the Father and the Spirit. Beginning with the Father, Moltmann stresses the intimate relationship between Christ and the Father, which is marked by "unheard-of closeness".[428] This intimacy is not to be described as being simply between God the Father and the Son of God, because this fails to express the "reciprocal intimacy of the Abba and the child".[429] In this relationship, both the Father and Jesus discover themselves, and therefore, one cannot say where Jesus ends and the Father begins. They are understood to dwell in each other and therefore, both "grow". Moltmann therefore portrays the relationship as mutually constitutive. The relationship with the Father, Moltmann argues, influenced Christ's understanding of himself.[430] It appears that Christ is growing into his role is what Moltmann means by adoptionism, rather than an automatic process. The reason that Moltmann understands this as not solely being adoptionist but also embracing pre-existent Christology is because "If this mutual relationship is constitutive for both persons and precedes the history they share, then it is not wrong to consider it to be – in the language of later dogmatics – *pre-existent.*"[431] The basis of pre-existence is relationship rather than ontology. Yet this is precisely where theological tensions emerge. The danger with this approach is that it emphasises experience and relationship in terms of Christ's self-understanding, and it must be asked whether relational experience alone can sustain a doctrine of Christ's full divinity. Christ is fully and truly God, and this must also be articulated by Moltmann. This approach allows for Christ to learn and discover his role, but the challenge is whether this comes at too high a cost, obscuring the eternal identity of the Son. Moltmann does understand Christ as not becoming the Son in time, but as bearing from the beginning the imprint of the Sonship.[432] But by refusing to articulate any ontology that is not relational, Moltmann risks undermining the Son's active agency in the incarnation.

[427] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 74.
[428] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 142.
[429] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 143.
[430] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 143.
[431] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 143. Emphasis in original.
[432] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 84.

Before pursuing this challenge to the Son's agency further, it is necessary to turn towards Moltmann's Spirit Christology. The Spirit is an integral part of Moltmann's Christology, Christ is seen to be "the Spirit-imbued human being".[433] According to Moltmann, Christ is dependent upon the Holy Spirit throughout his entire life: the Spirit leads him to the desert, to Jerusalem and to the cross, and through the Spirit's power, he is raised from the dead.[434] At Christ's baptism, it is through the Spirit resting on him reveals relationship with the Father as one of sonship.[435] Moltmann argues that the Spirit should be understood as the feminine side of God, in parallel to the Father.[436] Moltmann argues that many theologians have approached the virgin birth of Christ in the wrong way. The virgin birth's primary purpose is to emphasise the reality of Christ's humanity, which for Moltmann does not require on a biological claim of literal virginity. What is key is that Christ's conception and birth are the work of the Spirit. The Spirit, rather than Mary, should be understood as "the source of life," and "the indwelling of the divine essence in creation".[437] The Spirit is "the Mother of all created being".[438] The inhabitation of the Spirit in Christ in Moltmann's Christology has been described as meaning that the Spirit is "the working force" behind Christ's life, highlighting Christ's continual dependence on the Spirit.[439]

One of the concerns with using the Spirit as the source of Christ's capability is that it suggests that Christ has human limits while also finding a more indirect way to give Christ power and intellect that surpasses normal human abilities. Sharon Betcher warns that the Spirit could be "the spirit of Western science and culture," insofar as its eschatological and healing roles risks functioning as a force that normalises disabled people.[440] The consequence of such a reading is that Spirit Christology risks turning the limited Christ into an unlimited, non-disabled Christ who cures others. The Spirit would effectively be compensating for the perceived deficit in Christ's humanity. The difficulty of the supposed advantage that the Spirit or grace provides will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five, but for the moment, it is important to note that receiving help is not, in itself, sufficient evidence of an ableist dynamic.

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[433] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life,* 58.
[434] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 73.
[435] Cf. Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 90.
[436] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 160.
[437] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 85–86.
[438] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 157.
[439] Samuel Youngs, *Making Christ Real: The Peril and Promise of Kenosis* (Pickwick Publications, 2022), ch. 7.
[440] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 74.

While the Spirit gives Christ the power to heal and authority, this cannot be regarded as implying a superhuman Christ. Moltmann argues that the Spirit also experiences kenosis. According to Moltmann, the Spirit is Jesus' companion, and undergoes its own form of emptying and condescension, having made "its dwelling in this vulnerable and mortal human being Jesus."[441] The kenosis of Christ at the incarnation also involves a kenosis of the Spirit, who resides in Christ. Therefore, while "the Spirit fills Jesus with the divine, living energies through which the sick are healed," Moltmann argues that "it does not turn him into a superman."[442] Rather, the Spirit is the force behind Christ, but it is not merely a way to work around Christ's finite nature. Both Christ and the Spirit operate within limits, and this is rooted in Moltmann's broader treatment of relationships and power. Repeatedly in Moltmann's writing, he argues for an understanding of God that is not domineering, an understanding that he relates to kenosis. God empties himself in order to make space for others. For Moltmann, the shared kenosis of the Spirit and Christ means that Christ's powers cannot be understood as domineering; rather, they are exercised in a way that makes space for others and therefore avoid functioning as compensatory "superhuman" powers.

Having outlined Moltmann's constructive emphasis, it is now necessary to consider a central difficulty. Moltmann adopts a partially adoptionist approach in which Christ's identity is relationally realised rather than statically possessed, and on this basis presents Christ as fully assuming human existence with all its limits. The resulting challenge is how, within this framework, Christ's divinity is to be expressed. On one level, because Moltmann respects human limits, there is no suggestion that one has to push one's understanding of Christ's human intellect so that it can know things that do not seem reasonable for a human to know, such as the example of the pebbles in the river. But on another level, there is a concern that Moltmann does not adequately treat Christ's divinity. Paul Molnar has accused Moltmann in *The Way of Jesus Christ* of displacing the idea that Christ is the Son by placing such emphasis on the Spirit's work in Christ.[443] Moltmann does not understand adoptionism as meaning that Christ is adopted at his baptism or with the resurrection as other adoptionist Christologies argue. The Spirit inhabits Christ from his conception and therefore, there is no time that Christ is separated from the divine. The Spirit was always indwelling in Christ. This is meant to guard against the claim that Christ only becomes divine in time. But the difficulty is that while Moltmann does understand that there is no aspect of Christ that is separated from his divinity, his account

[441] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 93.
[442] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 62.
[443] Cf. Paul Molnar, 'Moltmann's Post-Modern Messianic Christology: A Review Discussion', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 56, no. 4 (1992): 684–85.

focuses on what the Father and the Spirit contribute rather than on the Son. As Moltmann wants to stress the unity of Christ, it may seem unnecessary to speak explicitly of the Son. To speak of the Son's agency or influence would appear to divide Christ again. Yet avoiding such language creates theological problems. The consequence is that, by focusing on how the Spirit and the Father relate to Christ in the incarnation with little reference to the Son's own agency or nature, Christ as the Son is no longer in the foreground.

This matters because Christology in general, and especially in relation to Christ's intellect, concerns how the divine and human participate and relate to one another. Thus, the question that emerges is whether in making space for humanity, one risks displacing the Son. This is important for disability Christology specifically, since questions of Christ's agency parallel wider concerns also about how agency and intelligence are attributed to disabled people. As noted previously, people with intellectually disabilities are perceived as lacking intentionality. While Moltmann allows for an understanding of Christ that learns from others, he loses a sense of agency, that he is the Son acting through his human nature.

Within Moltmann's broader Trinitarian method, he can be regarded as drawing the economic and immanent Trinity into closer alignment. The persons of the Trinity are understood to be defined by how they relate to one another and Moltmann writes that the relation between Christ and the Father is likewise mutually constitutive, continuing this relational pattern. Moltmann understands the Trinity through the lens of *perichoresis* meaning "that the divine persons are 'habitable' for one another, giving one another open lifespace for their mutual indwelling. Each person is indwelling and room-giving at the same time."[444] Through their dwelling, they "communicate eternal life to one another."[445] This framework shapes Moltmann's approach to Christ in the incarnation: in the incarnation this mutual communication is directed toward Jesus of Nazareth, rather than toward the eternal Son. However, this aspect of Moltmann's approach is not without difficulty. The problem with this approach is that it risks focusing on the wrong form of communication. It is not that the Father and Spirit have no role in the incarnation and cannot be thought of as providing help, but the issue becomes clearer when considering agency: there is a need to focus on the Son who is the communicator. He is revealing God through his life and if one only speaks of the Father and the Spirit as communicating to him, one loses the sense that the Word is the agent. While the

[444] Jürgen Moltmann, 'Perichoresis: An Old Magic Word for a New Trinitarian Theology', in *Trinity, Community, and Power: Mapping Trajectories in Wesleyan Theology* (Kingwood Books, 2000), 114.
[445] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 175.

language of instrumentality can seem to undermine the humanity of Christ, treating his humanity like a puppet, it makes clear that the Word is the agent. It prioritises the Word who took on human nature.

These concerns deepen when one turns to Moltmann's account of Christ's two natures. Moltmann does not explicitly write about *perichoresis* in relation to Christology, except in passing, but his understanding of the communication of idioms is certainly suggestive of *perichoresis*.[446] In arguing that the natures cannot be divided, and that the humanity shapes his divinity, it suggests that they have penetrated each other and that they form a single unified reality. Yet without the ability to differentiate, there is a risk of suggesting that they have dissolved into one another. Such a collapse raises not only classical Christological concerns but also has implications for disability theology. The underlying difficulty is the asymmetry Moltmann introduces repeatedly, he emphasises Christ's humanity as transforming the divine and being moved by the world. In effect, Moltmann prioritises one direction of influence between the natures. Moreover, just as creation requires that God limits himself and makes space for the world, it appears that the Son has made space to be human and taken on limits. The Son has contracted himself in order to be human. Consequently, this can imply that the human and the divine are incompatible with each other, as though their integrity were mutually exclusive. Particularly, from the perspective of disability, one must ask whether this mode of space-making inadvertently suggests that the integrity of a nature requires the other nature to become smaller.

In Moltmann's account, interpenetration implies that persons or natures make space for one another. Yet this raises a concern for disability theology: when viewed through a disability lens, does such a space-making risk depicting disability as the creation of an absence for another to fill? This concern arises in thinking about how persons relate to one another, where making space can suggest a deficiency or a lack. Moltmann does not regard God being affected by the world as being necessary, rather, God has chosen to be impacted by the world and to make space for it. It would be wrong to regard it as a compulsion. It can be regarded as a need in a qualified sense, insofar as God has defined himself as love and therefore, he needs the

[446] Moltmann acknowledges that historically the term was used to express the mutual interpenetration of Christ's natures. Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, "God's Kenosis in the Creation and Consummation of the World," in *The Work of Love: Creation as Kenosis*, ed. John Polkinghorne (Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001), 113–14.

beloved.[447] This does not necessarily require the existence of creation because God is trinitarian. Therefore, it is not an indication of a lack.

At this point, the disability concerns converge with the classical Christological concerns. Moltmann's emphasis on relational space-making, where Christ is open, receptive, and transformed, can make it difficult to avoid the implication that God is becoming new. To prevent this implication, some distinction between God and creation must be maintained. Without that distinction, the challenge is that humanity becomes a way for self-actualisation rather than being pure gift. Here the earlier proposal of two causes in Christ's learning offers help: it allows Christ to receive in a new way without implying that God lacks anything. This framework makes clear that no absence in God is required for Christ to learn. As will be explored further in the final chapter, there is a need to understand God and creation coming together without suggesting that there must be an absence in either God or creation.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how there is a need to avoid interpreting Christ's limits solely in a negative light. Christ as a human must be understood as having taken on those human limits without these limits functioning as punishment or consequences of sin. According to Aquinas, the only defects and infirmities that can be attributed to Christ must either have a soteriological justification which he takes on to heal or must be common defect that do not interfere with his mission. While Aquinas understands humanity and the rest of creation as finite and dependent on God, there is a lack of concrete engagement with what this means and as a result, the focus stays on salvation. Aquinas treats even normal aspects of human life, like hunger, as a consequence of sin. There is no acknowledgment that limits belong to human nature and are not themselves the problem. As the example of Christ's sex shows, there is acknowledgment by Aquinas that Christ had to take a particular form of embodiment, but he does not recognise that Christ's vulnerabilities and limits would also be part of his particular embodiment. This omission introduces a tension in Aquinas's account of embodiment: Christ is to be particular, yet he avoids the particularity of Christ's limits. The result is that Christology becomes stuck in the paradigm of sin, rather than understanding Christ's limits as not simply a matter of

[447] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 58.

soteriology but also as simply part of the nature that he has assumed, without imagining a prelapsarian humanity.

Moltmann's social Christology does not view the incarnation as simply about the restitution of sin. Part of Christ's role is to bring creation into the triune life. Unlike Aquinas, there is a stronger sense of incarnation anyway, in other words that regardless of human sin Christ would have become incarnate, in Moltmann's theology, because in the act of creation there is a separation that needs to be overcome. Furthermore, Moltmann understands vulnerability and limits as a part of the divine life and its love for the Other. The result is that vulnerability and limits are not unique to the incarnation, and therefore, they can be affirmed rather than negated. For Moltmann, what the incarnation accomplishes is that God's relationship with creation becomes embodied, for he has entered into their situation. Because Moltmann interprets the incarnation through the lens of solidarity, it means that he assumes the conditions of being a creature and makes them part of the divine life. This identification with the oppressed is where sin re-enters the discussion, but it is not a judgment on the human limits; rather it is the relationships and structures that creates non-persons. It is in this social sense that one can understand Christ as disabled, because he situates himself as one of these non-persons. This approach would appear to help affirm disability because the problem is not embodiment but the way it is treated. The problem is Moltmann's treatment of the transience of flesh. While it is treated as simply part of creation rather than as a response to sin, the difficulty is that Moltmann views it as a tragic part of creation that needs to be contradicted. Thus, embodiment with its limits again appears as a problem requiring correction, and therefore, while Moltmann can be regarded as having the view of incarnation anyway, it is only because there is a sense that creation from the beginning is in need of healing, of contradiction. The consequence for disability Christology is that it restricts the extent to which Christ can be understood as affirming the flesh that he assumes.

While this chapter has shown the challenges of affirming the physical limits of Christ, intellectual limits prove more difficult to affirm compared to physical disabilities. The reason why compulsory intellectual able-bodiedness is difficult to resist is that intellectual disabilities are seen to threaten a person's agency. When it comes to Christ, this chapter has shown that this concern becomes particularly prevalent because intellectual disabilities would appear to undermine Christ's mission. Aquinas's view that Christ could not have intellectual defects is for this very reason.

At the same time, there are several points made by Aquinas that became apparent in examining the three kinds of knowledge that are key for disability Christology. First, Christ's beatific vision respects the limits of human nature. The knowledge of God is unmediated, but this is not the same as total comprehension because it is not possible for the human person to fully comprehend. While this works for humanity in general, with Christ specifically, there is the challenge that as divine he is omniscient whereas his human intellect has limits and thus the question arises whether Christ's divinity undermines his limits. Stump's example of agnosia helps to imagine how Christ could both know in very different ways, without confusing or mixing the two. The affirmation of Christ's human limits is key for ensuring the reality of Christ's humanity as it is and showing that limits to one's intellect need not be seen as a lack but a result of one's nature. Second, although this framework risks implying that Christ has two minds, undermining his unity, nevertheless, it is necessary to argue that Christ is not lacking anything. Otherwise, it risks creating an ableist dynamic where his divinity makes up for a gap in his humanity. Third, Christ's human intellect is understood to grow without any suggestion of it implying a lack in Christ. Growth can be a feature of embodiment, not a deficit. It further underscores the reality of Christ's humanity. While it could suggest a lack in his divinity, Aquinas's account makes clear that it is not the content of the knowledge that is new but the way he acquires it. It centres on Christ learning with a human nature, and this should be reinterpreted as being embodied and subject to limits.

Yet Aquinas's approach to Christ's intellect ultimately creates real difficulties for a disability Christology that seeks to understand Christ's intellectual limits as real and normal. The two main issues are Aquinas's almost limitless understanding of infused knowledge and the view that Christ acquired knowledge independently. One of the biggest challenges is the idea that Aquinas makes Christ's human intellect almost unlimited in his infused knowledge. For Aquinas, even trivial knowledge, like how many pebbles are in a particular river, are viewed as a lack in Christ's knowledge, revealing a maximalist approach to knowledge, which is a clear problem from a disability perspective. But as shown in relation to acquired knowledge, he is willing to allow Christ to not have all knowledge at once. The infused knowledge is not an achievement, rather it is through grace, but this does not prevent the problem that Aquinas is pursuing the idea that ideally humans should have a maximalist idea of knowledge. He wants to attribute to Christ the greatest amount of knowledge while simultaneously maintaining limits, but in doing so, he undermines those limits. Rather than speculate what Christ did know, it is necessary to focus on what is vital, his ability to articulate the divine. In claiming that Christ is perfect, the point is not that he overcomes human limits, it is about recognising that in his limits he reveals God. This means that one must retain the intentionality of Christ, but this is not

opposed to intellectual disabilities, who also possess agency. The second difficulty is the idea that Christ acquired knowledge independently as it continues to make self-sufficiency normative, which is difficult from a disability perspective. Given the nature Christ assumes is not self-sufficient, his intellect does not need to be. The Chalcedonian approach pursued by Aquinas has the capacity to differentiate between his two natures and therefore, his human nature can be allowed to learn but not his divine. Christ could be understood to learn from others by differentiating between primary and secondary causes. Humans may be secondary causes of his learning, while God remains the primary cause. This would counter the suggestion that Christ did not receive help and make his humanity receive the help of others without implying a lack in his being. This preserves the role of the divine, while also leaving room for authentic human involvement in Christ's learning.

By contrast, Moltmann offers a markedly different orientation. Moltmann's relational approach to Christ's intellect has a very clear understanding that he has limits and is interdependent, although Moltmann does not restrict these limits to his humanity. The critical contribution of Moltmann's approach is that he helps to move away from focusing on the content of Christ's intellectual knowledge to a relational epistemology, where his intellect is defined by openness, receptivity, and mutuality. He learns with others and there is no suggestion that this involves overcoming his limits or that it would undermine his mission. His approach makes clear that there is no expectation that Christ is to be a lone genius who is self-sufficient. This approach challenges the binary between people with intellectual disabilities and people without an intellectual disability, because knowledge, in this account, is grounded in love and being affected with one another. It reframes knowing to mutual presence rather than cognitive achievement. There is a potential concern that this participatory approach requires big actions in response, which can be seen to exclude people with intellectual disabilities. However, Moltmann's theology can affirm what might seem small, knowing one another through each other's presence. Being affected by another is not the same as being effective. In this respect, like the rest of humanity, Christ is to learn with others.

However, Moltmann's model is not without its own complications. While there are clear aspects of Moltmann's Christology that goes against any suggestion of compulsory able-bodiedness, there are real challenges that arise from his relational approach. The major difficulty is that he does not adequately defend the agency of the Son. He understands Christ as being fully human and divine, but the difficulty is that Moltmann's approach to Christ's sonship is due his relationship with the Father. He argues that his approach is both pre-existent and

adoptionist, although he does not follow how either category has traditionally been understood. He wants to understand Christ as being in process, but this obscures his divinity. There is no suggestion that at a certain point that he becomes God's Son, however, without engaging in ontology, it risks suggesting that he is solely the product of others. While stressing the Father and the Spirit's roles helps to emphasise that Christ is not alone and is helped, it cannot be allowed to sideline the Son. Moltmann insists on the unity of Christ's two natures, which makes clear that his humanity is not just a puppet for his humanity. The approach he takes to the communication of idioms suggests that the two natures penetrate each other making a single whole. While this need not be asymmetrical, Moltmann only discusses the human becoming part of the divine life. It suggests that the Son has made space to be human. The focus is not on the Son revealing God through the medium of humanity. From a disability perspective, this is a problem because it creates an ableist dynamic where a lack is identified and this needs to be cured or penetrated to be made whole. What is particularly challenging, from a disability perspective, is that Moltmann's account risks obscuring the Son's agency, when agency need to be affirmed even when it is not immediately visible.

This chapter raises several significant questions that will be addressed in subsequent chapters. One of the biggest areas is what this chapter means for interpreting the cross. How Christ's intellect is understood, whether he has beatific vision, will have consequences for interpreting the cross. One of the key aspects of disability Christology is that it affirms the reality of embodiment, therefore, it is necessary to take the suffering that Christ experiences seriously. The way that Christ's intellect is conceptualised will have a bearing on the embodied experience of suffering. Furthermore, it will have to be considered whether the relational aspect of Moltmann's Christology and the absence of a Chalcedonian perspective create problems for his theology of the cross, with disabling dynamics being repeated in the Trinitarian relationship. Another area that needs further investigation is the relationship between creation and the divine life because as this chapter has started to explore, it could result in an ableist dynamic where one nature compensates for the other. Yet it must also be asked whether a non-competitive account could affirm the integrity of each nature without implying deficiency. Ultimately, the task ahead is to articulate a Christology that affirms limitation without collapsing agency, and embodiment without reinforcing ableist hierarchies.

Chapter Four
Resisting Tragedy: The Challenge of the Cross for Disability

Introduction

The cross is one of the most challenging areas for a disability Christology because it has the capacity to reinforce many ableist narratives which view disability through the prism of suffering, sin, or pity. One of the crucial aspects of disability theology is recognising the centrality of the body and its limits. Therefore, a disability Christology cannot ignore the reality of Christ's suffering because it would risk denying the bodily and mental toll of the cross, even as it resists equating disability with suffering. Christ's suffering is a key aspect of the cross, but the challenge is how to interpret that suffering. The question that arises is how one can make a connection between the experience of being disabled and the crucifixion of Christ. One way is to use the social model of disability because it focuses on the oppressive structures and injustice. However, it is not enough for Christ to simply enter into the experiences of disabled people; the question is whether this is enough to resist ableist narratives that equate disability with suffering. A counternarrative is necessary to make clear that disability is not understood as simply tragic or shameful.

The counternarrative required by disability Christology must therefore do more than describe Christ as a victim of injustice. If disability is only mirrored in Christ's pain, it risks reinforcing an understanding wherein suffering becomes definitive. What is needed is a way of speaking about the cross that retains the suffering while refusing to let it completely dominate the narrative. Such an account must include defiance, an active resistance to the shame that is placed both on Christ's vulnerable body and people with disabilities. Yet from a theological perspective, what the defiance is directed against becomes crucial, because God must remain on the side of the oppressed. Another crucial aspect of the counternarrative is that it cannot wait until the eschaton to affirm humanity; otherwise, creation is treated as something to be cured, rather than healed. There is a dignity to embodied existence now that cannot be taken away.

This chapter develops its argument through two major engagements. It will begin with examining Moltmann's theology of the cross and how it can be related to disability. It will demonstrate how Moltmann's emphasis on Christ's abandonment, though motivated out of

solidarity, risks reinscribing the narrative that disability is defined primarily as involving suffering and deficit. Second, the focus turns to Aquinas, whose account of suffering and joy complicates vulnerability in a different way. While his framework preserves Christ's agency, it threatens to portray Christ as a supercrip who overcomes limits rather than being subject to them. Within the discussion, I develop Aquinas's understanding of Christ's joy on the cross to argue that Christ's joy is not otherworldly but is defiant and involves a reclaiming of human vulnerability rather than a rejection.

Having established the chapter's structure, the remainder of this introduction outlines the theological terrain on which the analyses proceed. Moltmann's theology of the cross does not shy away from the suffering of the crucifixion. Thomas Reynolds argues that for Moltmann, full revelation of God is mediated through the cross, because it resists conceptions of God that reinforce power and privilege.[448] For Moltmann, the Trinity is not above the fray but is impacted by the world and its suffering because of God's love for the world. While a suffering God can challenge ableist values, Moltmann's account raises the question of whether he adequately distinguishes between different forms of vulnerability. This distinction matters because God's relational vulnerability in Moltmann's theology cannot simply be equated with the embodied and socially mediated vulnerability experienced by disabled people, a confusion this chapter seeks to avoid.

Moltmann understands the crucifixion as a Trinitarian event, involving not only Christ's humanity but also his divinity and the other persons of the Trinity. The Father and the Spirit are not merely distant spectators to the cross; in Moltmann's account they participate in the drama of the cross and also experience the suffering. In his early work, the Father's role is more prominent in Moltmann's theology of the cross. Moltmann interprets the crucifixion as the moment in which the Father withdraws from the Son, and Christ experiences this as abandonment. Because Moltmann emphasises relationality over ontology, this withdrawal functions not merely as emotional distance but as a disruption in the Son's relational life. From a disability perspective, such a withdrawal risks framing Christ's suffering primarily as deprivation, an impairment marked by loss. This matters because the Father's withdrawal functions as a relational impairment, and this absence mirrors the logic by which disability is framed as a deficit. Because of the emphasis on Christ suffering from the absence of the Father,

[448] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 6.

the question arises whether his theology provides a counternarrative that resists identifying disability with suffering.

The subsequent question asks whether Moltmann sufficiently resists tragedy. To answer this question, it is necessary to recognise two phases of Moltmann's theology. First, in Moltmann's early works, where the Father's abandonment of the Son dominates the interpretation of the cross. Attention will then turn to his later pneumatology, which assigns the Spirit a greater participatory role in the passion. The Spirit's presence appears to provide a counternarrative to suffering, emphasising that Christ is not alone and that he receives strength to affirm life rather than giving in to despair. However, it must be asked whether the Spirit's role adequately addresses the criticism of Moltmann's theology of the cross, primarily that the breakdown of the Father and the Son's relationship risks disabling Christ by the creation of a relational deficit.

The second section of this chapter will then focus on Aquinas's understanding of the cross, where the central concern is whether Aquinas allows Christ to suffer without undermining his agency. Many aspects of this concern require a return to and development of topics already identified in this thesis, such as Christ possessing beatific vision. One of the major criticisms of Aquinas is whether Christ is allowed to truly suffer. While Aquinas does understand Christ to really suffer, he also holds that Christ enjoys the beatific vision, creating a "mixed state" in which joy coexists with suffering. This joy complicates the account of Christ's contingency, both physically and mentally. Aquinas seeks to preserve a high degree of intentionality in Christ, but the question is whether he ascribes Christ's human nature too much self-possession. Whether joy undermines Christ's suffering also becomes a crucial question. At the same time, the Chalcedonian distinction presented by Aquinas allows for the possibility of a paradox within Christ's experience: joy does not negate the suffering. There is the possibility that joy forms part of the counternarrative to suffering, enabling defiance against a world that attempts to dehumanise. Yet Aquinas's theology presents challenges, particularly the absence of struggle on the cross. If Christ is not attributed sufficient vulnerability, Christ risks becoming a supercrip who overcame his suffering through his own strength. The chapter considers whether greater friction between Christ's joy and suffering without undermining his agency and beatific vision could help to address this challenge.

In reinterpreting the joy of the cross to be defiant, it is necessary to examine how this position fits into Aquinas's soteriology, particularly because he stresses the obedience of Christ in opposition to Adam's disobedience. The challenge for people with disabilities is whether these themes adequately reflect their situation. Some feminist theologians have raised the concern that ideas of kenosis, sacrifice, and pride are centred on stereotypical men's experiences of ego, when women are more likely to be taught not to be assertive. This connects with the experience of some disabled people where they are encouraged to be docile, to not be too much of a burden. In such contexts, obedience weaponises passivity and acceptance of suffering. The problem is not obedience, but how it is abused. Against this reading, Aquinas's account also suggests another possibility. Christ does not cling to physical security but embraces his limits. His shameless vulnerability reframes obedience: it is not an erasure of personhood, but a steadfastness that resists the world's strategies of humiliation. This shamelessness not only addresses the problem of pride but speaks to those who feel the need to hide who they are.

As a result of this reinterpretation, the chapter's final section will briefly look at its consequences for the resurrection. The resurrection has the potential to undermine the argument made if, like Aquinas, one imagines risen humanity as possessing bodies that are perfectly agile. This approach could lead to the eschatological homogenisation of disabled bodies, and therefore, it requires reflection on the risen Christ's wounds and how they may challenge the impulse to normalise disabled people at the resurrection. It needs to be considered whether the embracing of limits and the normalisation of being vulnerable are compromised, if ultimately one will conform to certain ideas of the perfect body.

4.1. A Disability of Absence

4.1.1. Disabling Relationships

As outlined in Chapter Three, Moltmann places great emphasis on relationships, and this continues to be a prominent feature in his theology of the cross. The key point of the cross for Moltmann is to show that God is impacted by the world's suffering; it is the central reason for the incarnation. Christ comes in solidarity with those who suffer, he becomes one of them, and brings their experiences into the life of the Trinity. Suffering is seen by Moltmann as a necessary component of compassion, ensuring that one is not indifferent. As a result, Moltmann argues God must suffer. He writes:

> a God who cannot suffer is poorer than any man. For a God who is incapable of suffering is a being who cannot be involved. Suffering and injustice do not affect him. And because he is so completely insensitive, he cannot be affected or shaken by anything …But the one who cannot suffer cannot love either. So he is a loveless being.[449]

For Moltmann, loving relationships entail being vulnerable and, therefore, it cannot be limited to Christ's humanity. Moltmann understands suffering love as the willingness to suffer for the sake of others. Love means that one is not focused on oneself but leads to fellowship with others.[450] The consequence of such a view of love is that God suffers because *of* and *for* his creation. There are two important aspects that could be beneficial for a disability theology. Firstly, it allows for vulnerability to be affirmed rather than subordinated to the ideal of self-sufficiency. Vulnerability is not something to be cured but also part of the good life. It is part of being in relationship with another. Secondly, vulnerability is not limited to Christ's humanity, it is a characteristic of the entire Trinity. As a result, it challenges the construction of a binary between those who are disabled and those who are not. There is no one, not even God, who can be understood as able-bodied.

This emphasis on vulnerability is attractive for disability theology, but there is a fundamental question that needs to be asked: whether the vulnerable love that Moltmann describes is analogous to the experience of disability. Appealing to vulnerability allows one to create connections between disabled and non-disabled people, as well as between God and the world, but vulnerability differs depending on the context and therefore, it is necessary to clarify what kind of vulnerability is being put forward. Vulnerability comes from the Latin word *vulnerare*, meaning to injure or harm. It reflects the ability to be wounded.[451] This definition of vulnerability is rejected by theologians like Aquinas, when they argue that God cannot suffer. God cannot be attributed any passive power, in other words, he cannot be acted upon. For Aquinas, God is pure act, which means his perfections are fully realised, and therefore, he possesses himself completely. He does not lack any perfection.[452] Moltmann disagrees with this position because for him, God's suffering is not due to a deficiency of being but it comes from the fullness of being.[453] The suffering does not suggest that anyone has power over God; instead, it means that what happens to God's people impacts God and therefore, makes God vulnerable. For a disability theology, this seems to allow for a connection between human vulnerability and divine vulnerability without relying on finding a deficit. It could mean that

[449] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 229.
[450] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 59.
[451] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 4.
[452] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.25.1.
[453] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 237–38.

disability is not something to fear or to be seen as contrary to God but may be a way to enter into the divine life. Reynolds argues that vulnerability involves a sort of hospitality, a welcoming the Other.[454] However, the question is whether the connection between God and disability is best made in his divinity rather than just his humanity.

In the person of Christ, there is a clearer connection with physical vulnerability and solidarity with other people. Christ's vulnerable love comes together with the contingency of his being. As the previous chapter explored (pp.94-95), Moltmann understands Christ as having taken on brute matter, he is a dehumanised person. He lived and died as one rejected by society. He held little, if any, power in his lifetime. What unites the vulnerability of love and the vulnerability of oppression is that on the cross, Christ through his suffering love enters into the experience of oppression. The love for another means that Christ is willing to sacrifice his own well-being. Moltmann writes that "If love is the acceptance of the other without regard to one's own well-being, then it contains within itself the possibility of sharing in suffering and freedom to suffer as a result of the otherness of the other."[455] Moltmann's interpretation of the cross makes clear that Christ experienced the costly nature of sacrifice. He sacrificed his life, his self for others and experienced the depths of despair in solidarity with the godforsaken. For Moltmann, the cross shows God's solidarity with humanity and the lengths that God will go to for those whom he loves. God is willing to take on the experience of suffering, weakness, and affliction. God wants to be with people in the places where they are suffering. God is willing to take on humanity's burdens; they are not an imposition but something God willingly accepts. This is the motivation for the sacrifice. Self-sufficiency and strength are not valued by God; rather it is a vulnerable love that is valued. Therefore, from a disability perspective, it does not encourage a stoic view of the human person but affirms the legitimacy of human vulnerability. The sacrificial aspect of Moltmann's theology of the cross makes clear that God values the human person, but it relies on an understanding of sacrifice that focuses on immense suffering. This vulnerability is rooted in a sacrificial perspective. One might suggest that disability can be related to it because it does not avoid hardship. There is no attempt by Christ to control the body.

It is necessary to consider how sacrifice is understood so that it does not inadvertently reinforce ableism, particularly because sacrifice can imply the creation of a loss. Sacrifice is usually understood to involve giving up something good for something greater. For a disability

[454] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, Introduction.
[455] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 237.

Christology, this is a concern because disability is often framed as a loss, whether of function, autonomy, or imagined futures. Therefore, to connect disability with sacrifice risks continuing to place disability in a deficit-based framework. This is further complicated because disability is not an aspect of the human person that is chosen. It cannot be regarded as an autonomous act of giving. However, it is not necessarily the case that just because something is perceived as good that the absence of that good implies a loss. It must be acknowledged that the absence of what is normally regarded as good is not necessarily detrimental to the individual. Although this clarification does not refer to the way that one becomes disabled, which can be traumatic, but only to the state of being disabled. For Christ's sacrifice to be as costly as Moltmann argues, it would seem to require that there is a real loss. The question is whether the cross can have a non-detrimental element that allows disability to be related to the cross without treating disability as a kind of suffering.

To make a connection between disability and God's vulnerable love, the question is what they have in common. On one level, one could argue that there is overlap because God stands with disabled people and is therefore affected by what affects them. This aligns with the social model of disability because injustice does not only happen to disabled people but also impacts God. Therefore, in oppressing disabled people, one oppresses God and makes him disabled. They share the experience of being wounded; however, in determining whether this is a fair comparison requires recognising that vulnerability takes many forms, ranging from physical to social. It is necessary to differentiate between kinds of vulnerability, since the experiences of disabled people do not always resemble the relational form that Moltmann ascribes to God. Both God and disabled people may share the ability to be wounded by another, but in the case of disability, it is not the same as the vulnerability that comes from a deep commitment to another person. The vulnerability of God is ultimately about his commitment and love. What Moltmann is describing is primarily about making oneself open to others and becoming vulnerable. But this is different to humanity's vulnerability, where it may be just a result of one's physical makeup. It is an unavoidable reality. At the same time, the contextual nature of vulnerability should make one hesitant to declare it a good thing without qualification.

Moltmann views the cross as the central revelation that shows the depth of God's love for humanity and the lengths to which God will go. The disregard for one's own well-being is clearly seen on the cross, where Christ suffers and dies for humanity. The challenge is whether the particularities of Moltmann's interpretation lean too much into the suffering, that it risks obscuring the love of God. Some feminist theologians have raised concerns that he risks

valorising suffering and abuse. While Dorothee Sölle recognises the contribution of a suffering God for the poor, she also argues that Moltmann's theology of the cross is "sadistic," where "the first person of the Trinity casts out and annihilates the second".[456] Similarly, Joanne Carlson Brown and Rebecca Parker accuse Moltmann of failing "to present a theology capable of moving beyond suffering as a fate to be endured."[457] They argue that it continues to repeat the pattern of abusive theology as it calls for acceptance of pain.[458] Brown and Parker are critical of suffering having any redemptive meaning, which is different from the position of this project, where there is a hesitancy in connecting disability to a narrative of suffering, including the cross. This, however, does not exclude the possibility of some suffering having redemptive meaning.

Suffering is a varied phenomenon; it is not always harmful depending on the context. Life may involve some suffering and hardship, but not all suffering is corrosive. Sölle's definition of senseless suffering is useful for considering what is at stake with destructive forms of suffering. She describes suffering as being "senseless because the people affected by it no longer have any possibility of determining a course of action, of learning from their experience, or of taking measures that would change anything."[459] What is crucial about this quote is that suffering is understood to result in a loss of agency. Suffering makes one powerless. Read in light of disability, one might suggest that the restraints on one's agency are due to the nature of one's disability, for example, a wheelchair user may not be able to walk. This does not adequately reflect the meaning of *senseless* suffering, unless one accepts the medical model of disability, where deviations from the norm are assumed to cause suffering. But the senseless nature involves much more than one's limitations; it is about being disempowered. For Sölle, senseless suffering centres on the extremes, and it is clear that it is unbearable. Indeed, she goes on to say that in these situations, death becomes desirable.[460] People without disabilities have expressed the view that they would rather be dead than disabled.[461] The reason for this perspective is people focus on the perceived loss of independence, control, movement, intellect, and the fear of being a burden to others. This is a narrative that people with disabilities have been fighting against because of the clear judgment placed on their quality of life. Some people

[456] Sölle, *Suffering*, 26–27.
[457] Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 19.
[458] Cf. Brown and Parker, 'For God So Loved the World?', 19, 26.
[459] Sölle, *Suffering*, 68. It should be noted that while Sölle is not writing about disability explicitly, she does cite "destructive psychoses" as an example of senseless. It is not something she engages with except as an example of senseless suffering. This would have consequences for considering mental illnesses, suffering and the cross, however, that goes beyond the scope of this thesis.
[460] Cf. Sölle, *Suffering*, 68.
[461] Cf. Joel Michael Reynolds, '"I'd Rather Be Dead than Disabled"—the Ableist Conflation and the Meanings of Disability', *Review of Communication* 17, no. 3 (2017): 153.

do have conditions that mean they suffer daily more acutely than others, which should not be dismissed; but the close association between suffering and disability must be challenged, as it can lead to a reductive narrative about the lives of people with disabilities.

To address the challenge of whether Moltmann's theology of the cross presents an understanding of suffering that is harmful from a perspective of disability, it is necessary to outline Moltmann's interpretation of the passion narrative. For Moltmann, the passion narrative does not begin in Gethsemane, but with the incarnation insofar as "Jesus is born to face his passion."[462] Christ's entire life is orientated towards the cross, which is the fulfilment of his mission.[463] His proclamations, healings and association with outcasts bring him into conflict with the religious authorities and the Roman government. Furthermore, Christ chooses to go to Jerusalem and to suffer.[464] Although Moltmann attends to the historical context of Christ's life and how it shaped him, the internal passion is of greater importance. The first major part of the passion narrative begins at the Garden of Gethsemane, where Christ is fearful. His fear is not simply about the bodily pain to come, rather it is fear that the Father has forsaken him.[465] This internal part of the passion begins at the Garden of Gethsemane, when Moltmann argues Christ is unable to be united with the Father. The Father is silent in response to Christ's prayers, which is not just a feeling that the Father is far away. Moltmann argues that "in Gethsemane for the first time he does not want to be alone with his God. He is evidently afraid of him. That is why he seeks the protection of his friends."[466] Moltmann describes Christ's experience in Gethsemane as being similar to "the dark night of the soul," but his description goes beyond despair or an existential crisis. Therefore, Christ is understood to be afraid of his Father, as Moltmann writes explicitly "He is evidently afraid of him."[467] This takes one step further than simply suffering because of human injustice; Christ suffers in his relationship with the Father.

The major difficulty with Moltmann's theology of the cross is that Christ's suffering and fear can make it appear as though the Father is a violent God who has betrayed him. According to Moltmann, the Father also suffers out of love on the cross, and this means that Christ's fear should not be treated as a definitive judgment about the character of the Father. This fear of the Father may instead reflect a subjective perception shaped by the Father's

[462] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 211.
[463] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 211.
[464] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 75.
[465] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, 'The Passion of Christ and The Suffering of God', *The Asbury Theological Journal* 48, no. 1 (1993): 21.
[466] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 76.
[467] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 76–77.

withdrawal. Moltmann understands God as withdrawing so creation can be a free Other and he appears to repeat this pattern in the passion narrative: the Father withdraws so that Christ may freely experience divine abandonment. The challenge, however, is that Moltmann locates the tension within the immanent Trinity, rather than locating it in Christ's human experience, and therefore, the experience of abandonment is carried into the divine relationships. The result is that this makes it difficult to articulate a theological counternarrative to Christ's experience of abandonment. Moltmann writes that Christ's fear "assailed in his person, his very essence, in his relationship to the Father – in his divine sonship."[468] In maintaining a clear distinction between Christ's natures, it becomes possible to suggest that what occurs in the economy is a matter of Christ's human perception without it implying a breakdown of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Christ, in his humanity, may not feel the Father's presence and love, but this subjective experience cannot alter the ontological reality that the Father remains united with him.

There is a need for a counternarrative to suffering. Moltmann's relational approach allows for God to be moved by those whom he loves. While this makes God mutable, it does not mean that God's goodness or love is subject to change. This is not in doubt for Moltmann, but the way he proposes that the breakdown of the relationship between the Father and Son is overcome requires examination. Christ prays for the cup, in other words, death, to be removed from him, which Moltmann interprets as meaning that Christ momentarily contradicts himself and then accepts the Father's will rather than his own. He characterises Christ as clinging "to fellowship with the God".[469] Later in his career, Moltmann appeals to the Spirit's presence as giving Christ the strength to accept the Father's will, a theme explored in the next section.[470] Before that, however, it is necessary to examine the Garden of Gethsemane from a disability perspective.

Moltmann's interpretation of Gethsemane risks portraying the relationship between the Father and the Son as strained. As Brown and Parker observe, Moltmann's account of the passion narrative can mirror abusive dynamics through its emphasis on fear and abandonment, patterns that resonate with the kinds of vulnerability to institutional and interpersonal abuse faced by many disabled people. Christ's feelings of fear and abandonment speak to the experience of being let down by that one should be able to trust. The silence of the Father that

[468] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 77.
[469] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 76.
[470] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 64.

Christ experiences can be seen as analogous to forms of silence encountered by people with disabilities when they turn to others for support. After disclosing one's disability or support needs, one may be ignored or dismissed. Such silence can be understood as a barrier between people, a point where one fails to listen to the other. The challenge posed by Moltmann's interpretation is that it suggests that the Father is refusing to acknowledge the needs of the Son. The Father thus appears to have abandoned the Son precisely when he needed him. This dynamic raises a fundamental problem for disability theology but for Christian theology in general, because of what it suggests about the relationship between the Father and the Son.

This theme of abandonment is found in what Moltmann regards as the central line of the passion narrative, which is Christ's cry "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mark 15:34) It has often been interpreted, for example, by Justin Martyr, Tertullian and Augustine, that Christ is quoting Psalm 22:2 and he is not simply crying out from feeling abandoned but is instead understood to be evoking the entirety of Psalm 22, which means that he is also pointing to salvation .[471] Moltmann disagrees with this perspective, arguing that this is a later tradition and noting that in early manuscripts of Mark, Christ cries "Why have you cursed me?"[472] In his view, lessening the sense of abandonment of Christ's cry on the cross or in Luke's Gospel omitting it, moves away from what he regards as the historical reality of the cross.[473] Moltmann doubts that this cry could have entered the tradition unless something like this had been said by Christ.[474] But more fundamentally for Moltmann, the problem with this interpretation is that it renders Christ as "despairing yet consoled," which he argues, undermines how Christ's "forsakenness overcomes ours."[475] For Moltmann, it is necessary for Christ to enter into the darkness that is the state of godforsakenness and it does not work if the cry expresses God's faithfulness, it must question who the Father is. Christ's cry on the cross is a protest against the suffering that he experiences and therefore, he must be understood to be a real victim.

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[471] Cf. Justin Martyr, 'Dialogue with Trypho', in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, ed. Alexander Roberts et al., trans. Marcus Dods and George Reith (Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), chs 97–106, http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/01287.htm; cf. Tertullian, 'Against Marcion', in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 3, ed. Alexander Roberts et al., trans. Peter Holmes (Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885), 3.19.5, https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/03123.htm; cf. Augustine, 'Expositions on the Psalms', in *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 8, ed. Philip Schaff, trans. J. E. Tweed (Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1888), 1:210–11, ttp://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801.htm.
[472] Moltmann, "The Passion of Christ and the Suffering of God," 22.
[473] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 149.
[474] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 79.
[475] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 79.

Moltmann's reading of the cross is heavily influenced by the problem of suffering. For Moltmann, the only answer to the despair and suffering that people experience is that God is beside them and suffers with them. What is at stake on the cross, for Moltmann, is not simply the life of Christ, but Christ's revelation of the Father. The question that Christ poses, Moltmann argues can also be understood as being "My God, why hast thou forsaken *thyself*?"[476] Moltmann recognises that there is an "open wound" in Christian theology which asks God why and cannot simply be explained away.[477] To address this question, Moltmann places greater emphasis on what happens between the trinitarian persons than on the historical trial because the focus is to be on Christ being abandoned by God. The passion is more than a trial against Christ by Roman and Jewish forces, it is a "trial that takes place between God".[478] In justifying God, Moltmann argues that God cannot be above the suffering in history but must be understood to be impacted by suffering as well as present in the midst of suffering. This is why Moltmann argues that the Father abandons the Son, it is on behalf of the godless and godforsaken. But this does not only impact the Son, it also affects the Father albeit in a different way. Moltmann writes that:

> In the forsakenness of the Son the Father also forsakes himself. In the surrender of the Son the Father also surrenders himself, though not in the same way. For Jesus suffers dying in forsakenness… But the Father who abandons him and delivers him up suffers the death of the Son in the infinite grief of love. …The Son suffers dying, the Father suffers the death of the Son. The grief of the Father here is just as important as the death of the Son. The Fatherlessness of the Son is matched by the Sonlessness of the Father, and if God has constituted himself as the Father of Jesus Christ, then he suffers the death of his Fatherhood in the death of the Son.[479]

Considering the criticism that Moltmann valorises suffering, it is important to recognise that by making the Father suffer with Christ, the Father should not be characterised as a bloodthirsty God seeking sacrifice. Not only does he suffer, but he suffers "infinite pain".[480] While the positions of the Father and Son are different, they both share the same sense that their identities are broken and in need of healing. Moltmann argues that the cross "reaches into the very depths of the Godhead and therefore puts its impress on the trinitarian life of God in eternity."[481] Suffering is not separate from the Trinity, rather it is part of the life of the Trinity.

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[476] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 153. Emphasis in original.
[477] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 166.
[478] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 155.
[479] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 251.
[480] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 173.
[481] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 173.

God is understood to enter into the human situation of godforsakenness and to make it part of his eternal life, according to Moltmann.[482] But the godforsakenness experienced by the Father and Son is characterised by Moltmann as the "breakdown of the relationship".[483] Leaving to one side the resurrection for now, there is the problem of whether this suffering can be thought of as analogous to disability. On one level, disability is often understood to be relational and therefore the breakdown of the relationship between the Father and Son could potentially offer parallels with this model of disability. Disability can change not only one's self-understanding but also one's relationships with others. For instance, they may experience discrimination and the relationship may end. For people who acquire disabilities, they may find that friends begin to exclude them in their lives as it is assumed that they can never come to social occasions and slowly the relationship will end. The diagnosis of a disability can feel like the death of a loved one because it is assumed that the relationship cannot continue as it was. This may not actually be the case, yet deficit-based assumptions often dominate how disabled people are viewed. This is particularly apparent with parents of children with disabilities, who may respond to the diagnosis of a disability by feeling as if the non-disabled child that they thought they had has died. Disability has been seen as a form of "symbolic death".[484] Upon a diagnosis, the parent loses their imagined future with their child, they may mourn the idea of watching them get married, going to college, sharing the parent's intellectual or physical pursuits, and the idea that one day their child will no longer be dependent upon them. Many parents may experience periods of mourning but with greater knowledge and supports, this can lessen over time. However, for others, it will continually cause tension, and the disabled person may feel rejected.

Yet this analogy has its limits and can only be taken so far; important differences must be acknowledged. Unlike disabled people, Christ is not subject to the same projected expectations by his Father. The Father's love is understood to be unconditional. After all, what Christ experiences on the cross must be desired by the Father as he delivers up Christ. This does not resolve the deeper problem: both Christ and many people with disabilities often exist in a precarious position that relies on others, particularly their parents. From deciding to continue a pregnancy after a disability diagnosis following genetic testing to advocating on behalf of a disabled child in the absence of societal supports, the relationship that a disabled person has with their parents is important because at least for the early years of one's life, if not longer,

[482] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 119.
[483] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 80.
[484] Keith Allred and Christine Hancock, 'On Death and Disability: Reframing Educators' Perceptions of Parental Response to Disability', *Disability Studies Quarterly* 32, no. 4 (2012), https://dsq-sds.org/index.php/dsq/article/view/1737/3177.

they are a crucial support. The Father is not only Christ's Father; he is the paradigm of what a parent should be, even when other parents fail. As Isaiah 49:15 writes "Can a woman forget her nursing child, or show no compassion for the child of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will not forget you." Christ's cry on the cross suggests that Christ's experiences of the Father does not live up to that promise. The disabling aspect of the cross is not just what is done to Christ externally but includes the absence of his Father. The social dynamics of disability are not simply found at the level of society; they have become part of the triune life. Moltmann wants to keep the wound of suffering open, rather than force premature healing, but it means that the Father is not part of the counternarrative of suffering except that he is in pain because the one he loves is suffering. This is too high of a price to pay.

Moltmann's approach to love and solidarity places the emphasis on becoming like the beloved, entering and taking on the situation that they are in. It allows for depths of human despair to be felt by Christ and the rest of the Trinity, but it makes disability more about a lack, though of relationship rather than ability. Because disability is frequently framed as a lack, even when understood through social dynamics rather than solely deficit models, the Father's absence in Moltmann's account reproduces this logic within the Trinity. One cannot deny that disability in the social sense shows how disabled people have been oppressed and made into victims, but one must affirm disability beyond the paradigm of suffering to ensure that the social narrative does not dominate how disability is understood. This is why the intra-trinitarian passion that Moltmann presents is potentially so damaging because it brings these human dynamics of abandonment and disempowerment into the Trinity. It means disability is being framed as related to the cross through the experience of suffering.

This tension in Moltmann raises the theological concern of what it means for suffering to be part of the divine life, which has been articulated with particular force by Johann Baptist Metz. He asks "How is discourse on the suffering God not just a sublime duplication of human suffering and human powerlessness? … How can the language of the suffering God, or of suffering between God and God, avoid leading to an eternalization of suffering?"[485] On one hand, the charge that Moltmann is eternalising suffering can be rejected because while Moltmann understands God as being impacted by the history of the world, God's suffering will be contradicted at the eschaton along with all suffering. At the same time, this does not address the central problem that the suffering that comes with godforsakenness is duplicated in the

[485] Metz, 'Suffering Unto God', 619.

immanent Trinity. Metz asks this question in the context of suffering in general, but it becomes particularly a problem in the context of disability because it becomes hard for disability to avoid being framed as part of theodicy. The abandonment and suffering of disabled people could be seen as a question of anthropodicy, which attempts to justify the goodness of humanity. The problem with Moltmann's approach to the cross is that there is greater focus on what the cross means for God rather than on the external forces, therefore, it is hard for disability to be anything other than an issue of theodicy. The relationship between the Father and the Son has broken down and for a relational approach, the absence of the Father is not simply a feeling. It impacts who Christ is, his identity as the Son. The closeness that was articulated in the previous chapter between Christ and his Father is gone. The Father has created a relational deficit in Christ. The Father's absence has disabled the Son; he is not supported. This raises the question of whether Moltmann's pneumatology can be a counterweight to this fractured relationship.

4.1.2. Reconsidering the Harshness of the Cross

In Moltmann's later theology, the Spirit takes on a more active role in the crucifixion, sustaining Christ in his suffering so that he is no longer depicted as abandoned in isolation. In *The Crucified God,* while Moltmann understands the cross as an intra-trinitarian event, he offers little account of the Spirit's role beyond identifying the Spirit as the one who raises the dead and reunites the Father and the Son.[486] This changes in his later work, where he develops a fuller pneumatology, identifying the Spirit as "Shekinah" the indwelling of God. As discussed in the previous chapter, the Spirit is understood to be Christ's constant companion throughout Christ's life, including the crucifixion.[487] But the Spirit is more than just present, Moltmann describes the Spirit as being "Jesus' strength in suffering, and is even the 'indestructable life' in whose power Jesus can give himself vicariously 'for many'."[488] Moltmann views the Spirit as also suffering during the passion, but he does not die with Christ rather he provides strength and intercedes for Christ. The Spirit is the divine presence that gives Christ strength to offer himself up.[489] This strength does not make Christ "superhuman", rather it sustains him.[490] While the Spirit offers support, he does not prevent Christ from suffering and struggling on the cross.[491] His presence "awakens new and hitherto unsuspected expectations about life."[492] The cross is

[486] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 252–53.
[487] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 61–62.
[488] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 64. Sic.
[489] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 64–65.
[490] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 62–63.
[491] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 51.
[492] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 73.

not solely defined by despair, because the Spirit introduces hope, pointing beyond to the eschaton. The Spirit provides the counternarrative to the immense suffering that Christ experiences, but in such a way that it does not negate the real suffering on the cross. What is experienced on the cross remains costly.

Looking at the Hebrew Bible, Moltmann argues that the Spirit is creation's life-force, and his presence heightens life's vitality. Moltmann writes that "The nearness of God makes life worth loving, not to be despised."[493] While this quote is not written directly in the context of the passion, it emphasises that even in the midst of immense suffering life has value. The vitality that the Spirit provides is defined by Moltmann as "love of life."[494] He argues that:

> Love for life says 'yes' to life in spite of its sicknesses, handicaps, infirmities, and opens the door to a 'life against death'. Born out of love for life, this vitality is nothing other than true humanity, so it has nothing to do with the health idols of late bourgeois society, where 'vitality' is worshipped as 'the capacity for performance'.[495]

This perspective would mean that disability is not something to be overcome, because the Spirit is not a force for removing all impairments or creating efficient workers. It puts the focus on persevering; the Spirit is working for a better world even when the world is subject to harmful forces. While not referring to the cross directly, this quote by Moltmann makes clear that Christ in experiencing the vitality offered by the Spirit does not overcome human suffering. He remains weak although he experiences his consolation from the Spirit. This means that there is a sense of hope that Christ experiences on the cross but without any suggestion that it is easy. His vulnerability is allowed to exist. The comfort does not undo the costliness of the cross. Solidarity is not only provided by Christ, who enters into their suffering, but also the Spirit, who is present in the fight to affirm the dignity of human life. There is an important counternarrative that means that the ways that people have been assessed as godforsaken, worthless, are shown to have value and that their lives are to be loved and that it does not require that they become invulnerable, independent persons.

By understanding the Spirit as aiding Christ on the cross, Moltmann emphasises that Christ is not a superhero. He embraces his weakness. The cross does not reveal a God who is triumphant; rather, God enters the reality of human situations with their brokenness and vulnerability. Reynolds understands Jesus on the cross as subjecting himself to disability and, following Eiesland, argues that Christ's resurrected wounds not only mean that disability is not

[493] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 84.
[494] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 86.
[495] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 86.

a flaw that needs a cure but also that Christ continues to be in solidarity with humanity.[496] Moltmann's theology makes clear that Christ is not self-sufficient, which was shown by his social Christology in Chapter Three (pp.93-94), but this is developed further with Moltmann's theology of the cross. By presenting the cross as a failure, it challenges the presumption of efficiency. The cross appears to be a setback and a sign of weakness that goes against efficiency and strength. Because of the cross's centrality, it suggests that weakness does not have to be rejected. Christ does not achieve anything through powerful and grand acts but by dying in pain, rejected by the world. Christ is seeking help in his suffering from the Spirit and it makes clear that there is no shame in seeking help, in not working alone. It directly confronts and challenges the world's ableist values.

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Moltmann's development of the Spirit's role does help to negate some of the criticism that a suffering God just duplicates human suffering because there is a much stronger source of resistance to the suffering on the cross. The Spirit is understood to be present to and consoling for all those who are voiceless, crying, praying, lamenting, and complaining to God. Moltmann writes that "When people are reduced to silence, under humiliation and persecution, it is often only prayer that keeps their hope alive, so they do not give themselves up."[497] In these prayers that express a deep longing for God and have "the power with which God draws human beings to himself."[498] This is what happens to Christ on the cross in that he yearns for the Father. The cry on the cross as a result appears to have a greater sense of hope than Moltmann's earlier interpretation of the cross. With the Spirit, it is not as clear that Christ has given in completely into despair. The Spirit with his eschatological role makes clear that what is being experienced is not all that is, there is a future that contradicts the current experience of suffering. This allows for the suffering of the cross to be real and challenging but without it becoming all that the cross expresses.

Although Moltmann's turn to pneumatology addresses some of the concerns raised by divine abandonment, substantial problems remain. Firstly, the Spirit's role is largely eschatological. The resurrection and the passion are viewed by Moltmann as one event and therefore, one should not focus solely on Christ's suffering but to look forward to the bodily resurrection. He uses the language of childbirth to describe the Spirit's role of bringing new life,

[496] Cf. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, ch. 6.
[497] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 76.
[498] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 76.

with both "birth-pangs and birth-joys".[499] Childbirth imagery helps to speak of the contradiction of embodiment which is that it is painful and yet there is space for joy. The suffering does not define the experience. Although the pain of childbirth should not be romanticised, since it can be traumatic and dangerous if the pain is dismissed, it nevertheless offers a counternarrative to the view that suffering is wholly destructive. However, this metaphor does little to address the disability concerns. The problem is that it keeps the focus on the future rather than the present. From a disability perspective, it risks implying that disability is analogous to the pain of childbirth and framing the resurrection as the goal that makes such hardship justified. As previously stated, it is necessary to resist the move toward the eschaton because it can limit the appreciation of the present, which is important for disability theology. It risks retaining the sense of judgment against disability, it is something to be cured. It must be acknowledged that Moltmann is critical of theodicies and eschatologies that suggest suffering could be justified. He views eschatology as overcoming suffering but without attempting to explain the suffering away.[500] The resurrection does not make the suffering worth it because God is understood to be protesting against that suffering. There is no justification for suffering. Yet this still does not address the need to affirm life now with all of its vulnerability rather than through future transformation.

The second issue is that while the Spirit embraces vulnerability, disability remains in the realm of justice. The dignity of those who suffer is recognised and their suffering is not treated as a judgment on who they are. The Spirit is a liberator, and this means disability is framed through the prism of injustice, and therefore, it needs to be contradicted. Christ is a victim, and the emphasis is on the solidarity that he provides for other victims. In this regard, the overall narrative of the passion has not been changed by the inclusion of the Spirit. In *The Spirit of Life,* Moltmann writes that on the cross, Christ "becomes a victim among other victims."[501] That solidarity is understood to be an important element of healing that relationship between God and humanity which has been damaged by suffering. It is an element that is present even in his writing about disability:

> Healing thus consists in fellowship and in sharing with and being a part in all things. God heals us in that he participates so much in our pains that they become part of his eternal love. The sick and despairing through all ages have experienced and discovered this again and again. I think here of the crucified on the Isenheim Altar by Matthias Grünewald. Not only is he contorted and disfigured with pain, his whole body is also covered with plague sores. "He carried our infirmities" is what this picture is trying to

[499] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 65.
[500] Cf. Richard Bauckham, *The Theology of Jürgen Moltmann* (T & T Clark, 1995), 81–82.
[501] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 130.

> say. And it said to thousands suffering from the plague. They recognized themselves in the man of pain, because he had become one of them.[502]

The quotation above does not focus on the need for a cure, rather it focuses on the solidarity between disabled and ill people and Christ. Their pain is found in the experiences of Christ on the cross. While it speaks of healing, it does not have a curative focus. Moltmann is not seeking to eliminate disabilities. However, the difficulty is that recognising oneself in "the man of pain" continues to keep the analytical centre on suffering. The suffering of Christ is recognised, because otherwise it raises questions about the solidarity of the incarnation. Moltmann argues that God values every life and that "Somewhere on the Son of Man's way from his *impoverished birth* to *his prayer in Gethsemane* and *his death on the cross*, each of us can find his or her own place or niche where God identifies with him or her and where he or she finds acceptance."[503] It is striking that each example Moltmann gives involves suffering. The solidarity that is being offered is primarily in the realm of suffering. This narrows the theological imagination. But this is limiting the way in which one can understand the solidarity of Christ with disabled people. The focus remains on disability as suffering, which fails to affirm disability apart from its pain.

While the Spirit provides greater support to Christ on the cross than in Moltmann's earlier account of the crucifixion, this development does not address the two main criticisms. The first issue is that while the Spirit's role makes clear that the Son is not entirely abandoned, it does not address the distance created between the Father and the Son. Moltmann's view that Christ suffered divine pain is the aspect identified with atonement, but this does not require that the Father abandoned him.[504] Solidarity does not require a breakdown of a relationship between the Father and the Son. Moltmann's account has the whole Trinity impacted and therefore, they all can be seen to be in solidarity with those who suffer; yet the way he constructs this participation produces Trinitarian disunity rather than communion at the cross. A different theological route that avoids suggesting Christ is an unwilling victim would be to emphasise the unity of the Father and the Son. As Dennis Jowers argues the "unity of [the Father and Son's] essence" would mean that there is a shared will which means that Christ cannot be interpreted as unwilling victim because it emphasises that it is not because of "anyone (i.e. any essence) but himself."[505] However, Moltmann continues to make the claim that Christ is a victim at the hand of the Father a central aspect of his theology of the cross. As outlined in the previous chapter

[502] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 116.
[503] Moltmann, 'Liberate Yourselves by Accepting One Another', 117. Emphasis added.
[504] Cf. Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 136.
[505] Dennis W. Jowers, 'The Theology of The Cross as Theology of the Trinity: A Critique of Jürgen Moltmann's Staurocentric Trinitarianism', *Tyndale Bulletin* 52, no. 2 (2001): 247.

(p.118), Moltmann adopts a social Christology, understanding Christ as being constituted by his relationship with his Father, but what is clear when it comes to the cross is that Christ is also constituted by the absence of the Father. This does not mean that Christ is no longer divine, but Moltmann's reliance on relationship means that Christ's role is mostly about being the one who is impacted by the other persons of the Trinity and the world. In this way, Moltmann's relational emphasis risks allowing Christ's identity to be determined by harmful relations, rather than providing resources that contest such formulations.

The second challenge stems from the disunity between the Son and the Father, since the relational approach does not adequately show that Christ is more than the recipient of the dynamics of others. The dynamic is clearly present when the Father abandons Christ, which appears to present the Spirit as compensation for the absence created by the Father. As a result, the counternarrative is mainly provided by the Spirit, while Christ's role is shaped by what is done to him. Christ's agency is narrowed to the willingness to undergo the experience of suffering. Appealing to an ontological Christology offers an alternative approach because it makes a distinction between Christ's suffering as subjective reality and the objective reality of God being present. It affirms that Christ is part of the counternarrative to the suffering. He is not merely a victim of history who is also divine; his divinity helps to establish that Christ's identity cannot be reduced to what is inflicted upon him. In placing a greater emphasis on his divinity as being an ontological concept, it follows that there is a counternarrative that one may not know at this moment but already exists presently.

It is necessary not to simply focus on what happens to Christ, important as it is, but to also make clear that it is not the whole story. Christ's flesh was harmed but rather than allowing the harm to dominate one's understanding of a person, or to intrude into the intra-trinitarian life, there is a need for the affirmation of the flesh. Eboni Marshall Turman identifies that what Chalcedon provides is "a constant negotiation and crucial "coming-togetherness" of opposing identities in Jesus Christ".[506] She identifies that the definition resists the either/or logic, which means that there is a bringing together of what happens to Christ and God's activity in Christ. For Turman, who writes from a womanist experience, it makes clear that what happens to the body is not the whole story, and that Christ's divine agency illustrates a counternarrative that resists the attempts of the world to define him.[507] While Moltmann makes clear that God identifies with bodies in their brokenness, he does not provide anything that one has to negotiate

[506] Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 37.
[507] Cf. Turman, *Toward a Womanist Ethic of Incarnation*, 43–44.

with. The extent that there is opposition in Moltmann's account, it is placed in the trinitarian relationships and a radically different future. Moltmann focuses on what is done to Christ, to the brokenness that he has taken on. The threat of looking solely at what happens to the flesh, to what happens to Christ, his relationship, is that it makes the injustice and the suffering a defining aspect of the person. There is a loss of transcendence, that is, the capacity to say that while Christ experiences human suffering, it does not define his divine identity. For disability to relate to the cross, suffering, while real, cannot be allowed to become the dominant aspect of disability.

4.2. Remixing the Mixed State of the Cross

4.2.1. Suffering and Joy on the Cross

Having examined Moltmann's theology of the cross and what his emphasis on suffering means for a disability Christology, it is necessary now to analyse Aquinas's very different approach to the cross. Aquinas does not place the same emphasis on the suffering on the cross as Moltmann. For Aquinas, the cross is first and foremost an event of love, the suffering is a secondary aspect to it. The question is whether this framework offers the counternarrative missing in Moltmann or whether it instead represents a step backwards by emphasising Christ's self-control in a way that diminishes his vulnerability. This section offers a reframing of Aquinas's "mixed state," while reinterpreting it to include greater vulnerability and defiant joy.

To determine whether Aquinas offers such a counternarrative, one must first address the tensions identified in the previous chapter (§3.1.1.), which may be even more significant when applied to the cross. Aquinas does not fully appreciate the physical limits of Christ's humanity except in a general way, unless they are understood to be defects from the Fall. At the same, Aquinas's view that Christ's human intellect is understood to be perfect and pushes his human intellect to be almost omniscient creates a dynamic where Christ's intellect can minimise his bodily limits. This dynamic is particularly important from a disability perspective as it could suggest Christ is a supercrip, a figure who overcomes impairment through exceptional ability.

As outlined in Chapter Three (pp.85-86), Aquinas is committed to Christ's suffering being real as it helps to emphasise the reality of his humanity. Christ's suffering follows

Aquinas's understanding of *communicatio idiomatum*; it can be attributed to the Son, not because the Son as divine suffers but because he is one person. This is expressed by Aquinas:

> Every change or passion, furthermore, proper to one's body can be ascribed to him whose body it is, So, if the body of Peter is wounded, scourged, or dies, it can be said that Peter is wounded, scourged, or dies. But the body of that man is the body of the Word of God, as was just proved. Therefore, every suffering that took place in the body of that man can be ascribed to the Word of God.[508]

This passage highlights how the passions and suffering are ascribed to Christ through his humanity, through his physicality. This does not prevent the passions from impacting the soul because Aquinas's approach to the soul does not separate it from the body. As Mark-Robin Hoogland observes, for Aquinas "the soul undergoes insofar as it is united with a body that undergoes. So the soul only undergoes indirectly".[509] This is because Aquinas views passions as being corporeal. He argues that Christ's suffering is only attributed to his humanity. This makes clear that Christ's experience is not hybrid but fully human, while also being fully divine.

But the question that arises is whether Aquinas allows Christ to be sufficiently human as a suffering body on the cross or if he retains a high-level of control over himself. For disability Christology, it is crucial that Christ's vulnerability is concrete rather than merely conceptual. Christ's vulnerability becomes a concern because, although Aquinas recognises Christ's physical suffering, his focus remains on what Christ experiences in the soul. This reflects Aquinas interpretation of the cross as an act of love, rather than suffering. There is a strong sense of intentionality in Aquinas's account of the cross, to the extent that Christ could have prevented his death but made the voluntary choice to die.[510] The voluntary nature of what Christ experiences leads Aquinas to claim that Christ's "soul did not repel the injury inflicted on His body, but willed His corporeal nature to succumb to such injury, …to have died voluntarily."[511] This is compounded by his assertion that Christ's body "kept its vigor" until his death and that his pain does not impact his knowledge of God.[512] As a result, suffering becomes something that Christ allows rather than something that happens to him. The combination of control and bodily vigour risks suggesting that Christ is only superficially wounded. This contradicts the involuntary vulnerability which is central to the experience of disability to a

[508] Aquinas, *SCG*, 4.34.11.
[509] Mark-Robin Hoogland, *God, Passion and Power: Thomas Aquinas on Christ Crucified and the Almightiness of God* (Peeters Leuven, 2003), 114.
[510] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.47.1.
[511] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.47.1.
[512] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.47.1.

fully human incarnation. At stake is whether Christ's suffering is something that he undergoes or something he manages.

Aquinas acknowledges that bodily suffering impacts the soul, since the body and soul are closely related. Thus, he argues that suffering affects "the whole soul", along with all its powers "in some way."[513] However, not all of Christ's powers are impacted. As Aquinas writes "the higher reason of Christ's soul, which is immersed in the contemplation and meditation of eternal things, embraced nothing adverse or repugnant that could cause it to suffer any harm."[514] The lower appetite feels the natural desire to avoid death. It seeks bodily goods and therefore the desires and inclinations are "instinctive" and "animal-like".[515] The higher appetite, however, is directed to God. As Thomas Joseph White notes, they are not separate types of reasoning, rather the difference is the object that each appetite seeks.[516] Because the object of the higher appetite is God, and because Christ possesses beatific vision, the higher reason does not suffer and therefore, not all of his powers suffer. In this regard, Christ differs from the rest of humanity whose higher reasoning can be impacted. Christ cannot doubt God; this epistemic certainty secures him against the instability that often accompanies human suffering.

In suggesting that Christ wants to be obedient to God and to preserve his life could suggest that Christ was conflicted. But Aquinas argues that the two appetites do not clash. Though the two appetites are concerned with different goods in the sense that one focuses on passible creation whereas the other focuses on eternal God. The good of the former is expected to serve the latter. This means there is no contradiction, because Aquinas argues that the lower appetites are governable by human's rational appetite and therefore, can choose a higher good beyond the perseverance of one's body. Ordinary people may wrestle between wanting to preserve their bodies and choosing a higher good, but for Christ, his sinlessness and his constant agreement with his divine will mean that he does not experience the same internal conflict.[517]

Given the stability of Christ's higher appetite, one might ask whether this makes the cross too easy, particularly since Aquinas views Christ's higher reason as providing

[513] Thomas Aquinas, *Compendium Theologiae*, trans. Cyril Vollert (B. Herder Book Co., 1947), 232.
[514] Aquinas, *CT*, 232.
[515] Paul Gondreau, 'Aquinas, the Communication of Idioms, and the Suffering of Christ', in *Divine Impassibility and the Mystery of Human Suffering*, ed. Thomas Joseph White and James Keating (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2009), 225–27.
[516] Cf. White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 335.
[517] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.18.1.

consolation. During the passion, Christ is in a "mixed state," where he anticipates the resurrection while also experiencing pain because it has not yet occurred.[518] As a result, his cry on the cross expresses the unrealised promise of salvation; in this sense, his perfect knowledge is not an obstacle but helps him to see the reality of the situation, the suffering and sin that exists as well as the need for salvation. For Aquinas, Christ, due to his sinless nature, cannot suffer from despair because it means one refuses to hope that God will provide and to persevere.[519] While Christ cannot despair, Aquinas argues that Christ experiences a greater pain, because, he can see the reality of sin in the world, and bears it.[520] Yet Aquinas also recognises that moral virtue does not prevent one from feeling sensitive pain as it is not completely subject to reason.[521]

However, the concern with Aquinas's prioritising of Christ's intellect and agency is that it constrains how fully the social conditions of the crucifixion can be acknowledged. A simple addition of social analysis will not solve the problem, because such analysis requires a level of vulnerability that Aquinas's account does not permit. In Aquinas's hierarchy of desires, Christ willingly embraces the cross in obedience to the higher appetite; this structure ensures that Christ's suffering is something he chooses rather than something imposed upon him. This emphasis on Christ's agency subordinates bodily suffering to the intellect and treats the forces that impact him as secondary to his will. From a disability perspective, this emphasis risks turning Christ into a supercrip, whose suffering is acknowledged but never allowed to limit him. For Aquinas, Christ's soul is understood to have experienced the fulfilment of the cross the joy of salvation, while he also suffered "every human suffering."[522] The suffering is regarded to be very real by Aquinas, but it does not constrain agency.

This emphasis on Christ's mastery resembles what Sallie McFague, describes as a life of self-possession, where one is closed off to others, and clinging to self-possession. This is in contrast with a life of poverty, where one is dependent on God and others.[523] Although Aquinas would describe Christ's life as one of poverty and with others, his Christology repeatedly emphasises Christ's possession of himself. What is missing is Christ's dependency on others, that he can be helped and subject to harm. It is continually caveated with the view that Christ is

[518] Gondreau, 'Aquinas, the Communication of Idioms, and the Suffering of Christ', 319.
[519] Cf. White, *The Incarnate Lord*, 312.
[520] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.46.6.
[521] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 3.46.6.
[522] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.46.5.
[523] Cf. Sallie McFague, *A New Climate for Christology: Kenosis, Climate Change, and Befriending Nature* (Fortress Press, 2021), 75.

letting himself undergo the experiences, to be harmed or helped. Aquinas's portrayal of Christ as affected by events yet ultimately in control does not provide a sufficient account of Christ's vulnerable humanity.

From a disability perspective, Aquinas's view of the suffering and consolation at the cross is difficult to interpret. On one level, the mixed state allows for multiple elements to coexist and prevents physical pain from dominating the meaning of the crucifixion. For a disability Christology, it allows disability to connect with the cross without collapsing it into suffering. Yet, it remains vital not to deny the reality of suffering, for both Christ and people with disabilities, which must be taken seriously. Yet this minimisation operates differently in each case. Disabled people's pain is dismissed because they are not always regarded as fully human, whereas Christ's suffering is downplayed in order to emphasise his divinity rather than his humanity. The rejection of the reality of suffering elevates Christ rhetorically because it protects his divinity, whereas for people with disabilities the same denial functions to denigrate, undermining their full humanity. To affirm Christ's full humanity requires acknowledging real human suffering. As Rowan Williams writes "the suffering that the Word takes to itself in the Incarnation is the absolutely specific human pain of Jesus and, consequently, the specific human pain of all those for whom the Word in Jesus speaks."[524] The Chalcedonian framework that Williams is commenting on, and that Aquinas affirmed, means that Christ's genuinely human suffering is recognised as fully real and therefore grants legitimacy to the human experience of suffering. It is not God experiencing it as God, but the Word suffering through the assumed human nature. Yet Aquinas's articulation requires a fuller acknowledgement of Christ's vulnerability and pain if it is to make clear that he undergoes genuinely human suffering. For the counternarrative to work, it must take the fragility of humanity seriously so that when Christ's suffering is attributed to his humanity, it is clear that while he is unique, his humanity is like everyone else.

On the cross, Aquinas continues to emphasise Christ's self-possession. The suffering is real, but it is always on Christ's terms and therefore risk diminishing his vulnerability which is central to disability theology. From a disability perspective, this does not challenge the ideal of self-sufficiency, rather Christ embodies it. The unity of Christ's human and divine wills is important because it ensures that there is not a gulf between what the two natures want. However, the unity cannot be allowed to collapse the human will into the divine will and

[524] Rowan Williams, *Christ The Heart of Creation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 92.

obscure Christ's human struggles. In his humanity, Christ cannot want to die on the cross in the same way as his divinity, even with his greater insight given to him with his beatific vision. For Christ to truly enter into the condition of being human, there must be a sense of neediness or helplessness in Christ humanity. This does not undermine Christ's agency but acknowledges that human limits and conditions impact human agency.

If Christ's suffering is to be understood as genuinely human rather than superhuman, then another element of Aquinas's account must be reconsidered: Christ's joy. To understand how suffering and vulnerability are to be understood in relation to the cross, it is necessary to clarify how joy relates to Christ's experience. Joy on the cross could seem inappropriate, but it is vital for the counternarrative that prevents Christ's victimisation from being the primary lens for interpreting the crucifixion, a problem found in Moltmann's account. Joy can be a form of resistance. Marginalised groups, including disabled people, have argued that to find joy despite the oppression that exists is a form of resistance rather than a denial of hardship. Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha writes on disabled joy, arguing that disabled people are "not supposed to be happy. We're not supposed to exist, or to be alive."[525] It is a refusal to be defeated. In giving space for joy, it avoids any attempt to essentialise the experience of human oppression. It allows for recognising a deeper reality of dignity and worth even in the face of systemic oppression.

The question is whether Christ's mixed state can be interpreted so that his joy is a form of resistance. For Aquinas, spiritual joy is caused by love either from the presence of the beloved or because of the existence of the one that is loved.[526] This joy does not prevent sorrow, it can coexist with the sadness that others are not participating in a certain good. Christ's joy comes from his beatific vision, which means joy that remains largely cognitive rather than embodied. For Aquinas, pleasure is only about the body, whereas joy centres on reason and contemplation.[527] The problem is that in considering the cross and joy, it seems impossible to speak of an embodied joy within Aquinas's framework. At the same time, it is difficult to offer an understanding which does not have one transcend from one's embodied existence to a deeper reality to some degree. But the biggest challenge is the lack of tension in Aquinas's account, which prevents Christ's joy from being a form of resistance.

[525] Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future Is Disabled: Prophecies, Love Notes, and Mourning Songs* (Arsenal Pulp Press, 2022), 305.
[526] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.28.1.
[527] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.31.3.

If Christ's joy is invulnerable to anything, untouched by the conditions of embodiment means that his joy is static rather than dynamic. Aquinas's account therefore lacks the tension between suffering and joy that is central to a disability perspective. To articulate the kind of joy that Aquinas's account cannot provide, Willie James Jennings offers a helpful framework. He describes joy as being a work, that one holds on to life even when little else makes sense.[528] This understanding allows for struggle rather than treating it as a knowledge that one can perfectly possess. For Aquinas, this approach threatens Christ's epistemic stability which he understands as integral for Christ's agency. As mentioned in Chapter Three (pp.103-106), beatific vision ensures the intentionality of Christ's actions as not being divine but human. He knew what he was doing. Any suggestion that Christ's joy was vulnerable and that his actions were an act of faith would seem to put his relationship with his divinity in question. But this means that there is no sense of tension between the sorrow and joy because the sorrow and joy are separate and do not impact each other. This tension not only expresses the hardship of the cross but also allow for disability to be related to the cross without reducing disability to suffering.

The key to resolving this tension lies in Aquinas's own affirmation of Christ's temporality. The struggle for joy does not require that Christ must lose his beatific vision. In order to make it clearer that there is no contradiction between the struggle for joy and Christ's beatific vision, it is necessary to emphasise that Christ in becoming human is subject to time. To be human means to be temporal and mutable. This is needed to be part of the understanding of Christ's human vulnerability and limits because it moves away from any suggestion that everything Christ knows is immediately apparent and static. The problem with Moltmann's approach was that the subjective experience of Christ was not adequately differentiated from the trinitarian relationships, which is one of the reasons why a more explicitly joyful account is needed. Making clear that there is not simply an absence of relation on the cross and that regardless of what Christ or anyone else experiences, God is present does not require that on an experiential level that it is perfectly felt.

To deepen this account of Christ's temporality, it is necessary to return to the reinterpretation of infused knowledge developed in the previous chapter (pp.107-109). It was argued that Aquinas's infused knowledge should be reinterpreted as Christ's capacity to translate the ineffable, rather than the idea that Christ as human knows everything. It was

[528] Cf. *Theology of Joy: Willie James Jennings with Miroslav Volf*, (Yale Center for Faith & Culture, 2014), 1:01-4:10, YouTube Video, 20:28, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fKD4Msh3rE.

argued that in adopting the language of humanity, there is a need to recognise that there are grammatical rules and limits which are important to return to. Suffering and pain are precisely those points where language fails, and so Christ's suffering involves a struggle of articulation and interpretation rather than a break in communion with God. Christ is a mutable human being, who is attempting to hold onto the unparalleled knowledge and joy of God, and to human dignity, even when bodily and societally, he is being told to abandon those truths. He is holding on, but this is temporal and therefore, while the knowledge is always there, it does not have to be felt to the same extent all the way through. The immediacy of the divine does not overpower the human experience and allows for a struggle, there is a need to continue to hold on as time is passing. His two wills are in union, but his human will can cooperate while also straining to hold on to the truth. This is not despair, but a continual strain to hold onto that reality.[529] The truth is known but not at every moment is it felt to the same extent. This preserves Aquinas's doctrinal commitments while allowing a phenomenology of struggle that speaks to the experience of disability.

To avoid treating the beatific vision as incompatible with Christ's vulnerability, it is important to see that the vision itself gestures toward the eschaton, when humanity will see God face to face. However, the eschaton and the cross are a very different set of circumstances. At the eschaton, one's entire being depends on God at every level, including bodily needs. In the present moment, particularly for Christ on the cross, human dependency is more variable and subject to more forces than the eschaton. Time introduces a vulnerability that is not comparable with the eschaton. Being human now means being mutable and subject to forces, and therefore, it is not fully comparable to what is to come. Recognising Christ as temporally situated and affected by temporal conditions prevents the beatific vision from overwhelming his human experience. It can remain operative without eliminating the reality of his human suffering.

As argued throughout this chapter, the tension between suffering and joy must be retained; joy cannot be an automatic process. Otherwise, there is nothing for the joy to resist. Lamar Hardwick writes that understanding joy as part of the cross helps to dismantle the shame that is associated with disability. Joy rebels against practices that attempt to control and smashes the ableist idols of desirability.[530] The beatific vision and joy helps Christ's resistance, but it requires that there is friction, between Christ's suffering and the defiant joy. The resistance is not present if Christ's personal suffering is minimised. For the defiance to be

[529] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.20.3.
[530] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 62; 170.

meaningful, there is a need that Christ feels the limits of humanity and being subject to forces beyond his control. The knowledge of God does not prevent it from being an effort to live out that reality.

By suggesting that Christ's joy on the cross is a work raises once again the question of whether Christ is a supercrip. Alison Kafer describes a supercrip as one "who can handle such an (allegedly) horrible life must be strong; a lesser man would have given up years ago."[531] But the strength is not simply that they do not give in to despair but also that they accomplish something that is beyond the low expectations of disabled people.[532] Framing Christ's action as a work of resistance could suggest that he has a strength that others do not possess. This implication is difficult to avoid as Christ is unique and achieves what others could not, salvation. Automatic joy may seem to avoid the suggestion that it comes from Christ's personal strength, yet it risks diminishing the reality of the temporal experience. The reinterpretation that is being offered here could be seen to move towards a more supercrip understanding of Christ because it requires that Christ work to resist the forces that cause suffering. But what stops Christ from becoming a supercrip is because the resistance is not to disability in its totality, but rather to the suffering and oppression. It is fundamentally the way that vulnerability and limits create oppression that are being critiqued. Christ while retaining the joy, the knowledge of God, embraces the limits of humanity. He enters into the situation rather than overcoming the limits.

To sustain this account of Christ's vulnerability, it is also necessary to recognise that he does not endure the cross in isolation. Christ is not on his own but supported through the ordeal of the crucifixion. The need to retain joy rather than receiving it automatically makes dependence on the Spirit intelligible. Moltmann was right to suggest that Christ was supported by the Spirit; this support shows that Christ does not endure the cross in isolation. The relational aspect and grace will be explored in the next chapter, but at this point it is necessary to distinguish between curative forms of relationship, which presume a deficit that must be repaired, and genuinely supportive forms of interdependence, which honour the person's limits without attempting to erase them. From a disability perspective, curative models imply that relationships must compensate for disability, whereas supportive ones recognise the person as whole and worthy in their embodied limits. By having the Spirit help Christ, the point is not to make Christ overcome the limits of his humanity, nor to cure the lack; rather, the point is to recognise that he is in need of help. This is not a rejection of interdependence but a recognition

[531] Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 90.
[532] Cf. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 141.

that not all understandings of interdependence are equal. The retention of joy is not simply by Christ's human efforts but by divine aid.

To complete the counternarrative, it is necessary to clarify how God relates to suffering. Defiant joy fits within a Chalcedonian two-natures approach because it distinguishes between Christ's human experience of suffering and the deeper reality that this suffering does not define him, nor people with disabilities. As shown in the literature review (§1.2.4.), identifying Christ's suffering in his divinity could mean that he and the rest of the Trinity are disabled, but this approach risks prioritising suffering as a defining aspect of disability. By allowing Christ, through his human nature to experience joy, one begins the work of creating a contrasting narrative to suffering. Divine support deepens this counternarrative, but it is not sufficient on its own; the point is that God identifies with those who suffer without suffering as God. If joy is to be genuinely defiant, Christ's suffering cannot be mirrored in God's being. In the incarnation, the Son enters into the experience of human suffering and experiences it as humanity does, rather than as a divine subject. Yet the counternarrative requires clarification on how God relates to suffering, since Christ's joy and vulnerability ultimately rest on this divine stance. The problem with arguing that God also suffers is that it suggests that God is in need of contradiction, of salvation. As Moltmann's interpretation of Christ's cry on the cross shows, there is an accusation against God asking him to fulfil his promises. If this accusation is placed inside God, the theodicy question has entered the divine life. It keeps the focus on what happens to people and their subjective experience and this shapes how God is understood. A suffering God does not provide transcendence that is needed to counter what is happening in the world and to reject the world's attempts to define disabled people through suffering.

In assuming human nature, God is united to the subjective experience of suffering and of limits, and retaining the idea that God is impassible does not entail indifference or absence; his impassibility must be distinguished from Stoic apatheia or a cold, unfeeling deity, and instead names the steadfastness of divine love that sustains vulnerable creatures. As the next chapter will explore, transcendence means that God is not identified with the world or bound by its conditions. This is crucial because it contrasts with the experience of suffering and also makes clear that God is not subject to time and is not part of the struggle of humanity. An impassible God provides a clear contrast between the subjective experience in creation and the goodness of God and the dignity of the human person. In refusing to say that God suffers as God, one makes clear that God is not working to affirm God's own dignity, but the dignity of those God has identified with. It means that there is an opposition to what happens to Christ. It

points to a reality where one is not simply the product of harmful relations. From a disability perspective, it makes clear that while one may be struggling with one's disability, how others define the individual does not ultimately define the individual. A God who does not suffer adds to the defiant joy, because it makes clear that the world's desire to define people with disabilities as tragic is false. Disabled people are not burdens and are already accepted as they are. The repeated challenge of a passible God is that it runs the risk of making God part of creation, and therefore, subject to the destructive forces of the world. An impassible God, by contrast, allows for a space that contradicts what is imposed by the world and makes joy possible.

4.2.2. The Shamelessness of the Cross and the Pride of Adam

In arguing that Christ possesses a joy that is defiant, the question that emerges is how it would fit within Aquinas's soteriology. One of the key themes of his soteriology is that Christ is obedient to his Father, which, at first glance, this would appear to be against the defiant joy being developed in this chapter. In Aquinas's interpretation of the hymn in Philippians, verse 8, where Christ is said to have humbled himself, is understood as referring to Christ's becoming obedient. In his human nature, he is obedient, and this is the opposite of the sin of pride. Christ is obedient in that he is willing to suffer and to die; he does not refuse.[533] Part of Christ's soteriological mission is in response to the Fall; Christ is obedient because it heals the rupture caused by the disobedience of Adam.

It is precisely this appeal to obedience, sacrifice, and submission that has raised concern among feminist theologians. Some feminist theologians have been critical of the concepts of sacrifice and obedience, because they can be used to support the subordination of women.[534] Women have not been permitted prioritise themselves; they are socialised to give up their desires for the sake of others.[535] This dynamic is also a problem for people with disabilities because their identity, desires, and needs are not always respected when they fail to conform to

[533] Cf. Aquinas, *Commentary on Saint Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, 2.2.
[534] Cf. Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Sheffield Academic Press, 1993), 32–33; cf. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, 'Feminist Theology as a Critical Theology of Liberation', *Theological Studies* 36, no. 4 (1975): 607–8; cf. Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Orbis Books, 2013), 145–47.
[535] Cf. Valerie Saiving, 'The Human Situation: A Feminine View', *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960): 109.

dominant expectations. One might assume, that as a result, there can be no way for obedience to be useful for disability theology.

One response might be that the problem is not obedience itself, but that historically those who have been in charge did not deserve people's support. Rather than a rejection of all forms of obedience, it needs to be recognised what constitutes a legitimate form of authority. According to Aquinas, obedience in general is understood to be acting on the instruction of those who are rightly one's superiors. While Aquinas's view of feudal society does mean that people are expected to be obedient to one's superiors, he also maintains that obedience to God comes before any other authority.[536] Furthermore, a key aspect of divine transcendence is that it prevents uncritical identification of worldly authority with God; transcendence requires critical discernment.[537] This can be the starting point to ensure that earthly authority figures are not seen as absolute and that disabled people are therefore not expected to conform merely out of obedience to those who are socially assumed to know more than they do. One could argue that the diversity of creation means refusing conformity to dominant norms is not necessarily disobedience to God but an affirmation of how God has created human beings to differ. Obedience to God can mean resisting the oppressive forces of the world. At the same time, this line of argument remains incomplete; to do justice to these interrelated themes requires further examination of the central example of Christian obedience: the crucifixion of Christ.

As stated repeatedly, the challenge of connecting the cross with the experience of disability is the violence and suffering of the cross. To be obedient to the extent that one is even willing to die risks creating the expectation that one is willing to be passive and to accept the status quo even when it does harm to oneself. Moltmann's theology of the cross has protest at its heart of it, Christ's cry of abandonment is an accusation and a demand for eschatological transformation. As previously mentioned, there is a major difficulty with this approach, namely that it fractures the relationship between the Father and the Son. It relocates suffering and protest into the Trinity, and in doing so risks portraying rupture within Trinitarian communion as necessary for protest. Therefore, there is a need for an understanding of Christ's obedience to show that the human will is in line with the divine. It makes clear that Christ is not an unwilling victim and avoids any sense of harm within the Trinity. But it must be considered whether Aquinas's approach can help in this regard.

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[536] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.104.5-6.
[537] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *The Politics of God: Christian Theologies and Social Justice*, Thirtieth Anniversary (Fortress Press, 2022), 56.

To be able to consider whether Aquinas's theology of the cross has a destructive element, it is necessary to examine his understanding of the cross and sacrifice. Aquinas's soteriology makes clear that the crucifixion is primarily an event grounded in love and the restoration of humanity's relationship with God. Therefore, while the cross is about making recompense, the focus is on righting a relationship that has gone wrong because of the sins of humanity. He writes that obedience is preferred by God over "sacrifices, because by sacrifices another's body is slain, whereas by obedience we slay our own will".[538] Because Aquinas views obedience as meaning the sacrifice of one's will, it is understandable why some fear that such obedience is self-destructive, despite not seeing the violence of the cross as the primary focus. Aquinas uses the term proper will or *propria voluntas,* which figures like Anselm understood as meaning that one is willing that which is prohibited by God, when only God should have a *propria voluntas.* Humanity should be subject to God's will and therefore, for a human to have a *propria voluntas* means to have a disordered will.[539] For Anselm, humans having *propria voluntas* is to usurp God.

Unlike Anselm, Aquinas's use of *propria voluntas* does not always have negative connotations, which is particularly apparent in how he attributes it to Christ. When Christ gives up his will, this is not a denial of his free will but a relinquishing of his *propria voluntas,* which is directed towards proper goods, like life.[540] Proper goods are in keeping with God's will, but they can be given up voluntarily for the common good. To sacrifice proper goods, like one's life, is therefore not to deny their value but to lay them down for a higher end. The charge that the cross encourages an ethic which calls for self-erasure should be taken seriously but at the same time, it must be acknowledged that there are times when goods are to be sacrificed in pursuit of a higher good.

Aquinas's position on *propria voluntas* is in keeping with what has already been observed in his theology, which is that there is a hierarchy of values. While there are reasons to critique Aquinas's position that the body is at the bottom of the hierarchy of values, it is equally crucial to recognise that bodily comfort cannot always be highest good in every circumstance. However, it is key to recognise that there are occasions that must not be treated in this way, for

[538] Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.104.3.
[539] Cf. Aaron Maddeford, 'Obedience, Conscience, and Propria Voluntas in St. Thomas', *The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 86, no. 3 (2022): 432.
[540] Cf. Maddeford, 'Obedience, Conscience, and Propria Voluntas in St. Thomas', 433–37.

instance, when disabled people's basic bodily needs such as nutrition or hygiene are neglected.[541] These are not instances of virtuous sacrifice. They are all examples of dehumanising neglect, and a sacrificial and obedient posture in these contexts collapses agency into compliance and leaves the injustice unaddressed. To treat these injustices as occasions for sacrifice is not theological maturity but exploitation.

While disability theology requires that the body is attended to, it cannot equate dignity with the absence of pain or dependence. While there is a need to understand disability that resists a tragic framing, a refusal to acknowledge suffering merely reinstates ableist ideals of bodily optimisation and bodily control. The ideal that is sought for is a body one that is untouched by vulnerability, incapacity, or need. However, the crucifixion exposes and overturns precisely this fantasy of invulnerable embodiment.

True sacrifice moves towards justice and communion; it cannot centre on making the oppressed convenient to others. To those in power, it may have been hoped that Christ's death would be convenient as it would end the Jesus movement and the questioning of existing power structures, but Christ's death ultimately was not convenient. This was not the kind of sacrifice that Christ was making; he is not going along with what they wanted but confronts the unjust structures that exploit vulnerability. When thinking about Christ's sacrifice, the key distinction is therefore between suffering imposed through injustice and suffering embraced out of love and solidarity. Christ's acceptance of bodily vulnerability does not mean he embraces abusive structures; it means he refuses to treat bodily security as the measure of human worth. While constant vigilance is needed against harmful ideas of obedience and sacrifice, one cannot deny that giving up proper goods is sometimes necessary. Otherwise, there is a risk of complacency. While the social dimensions of the cross should not be ignored, Aquinas's insistence that Christ's human will voluntarily accepts his suffering clarifies that the crucifixion is not only something that happens to him. Motivated by love and justice, Christ does not cling to bodily security, and this refusal to idolise bodily invulnerability may be the key to understanding the cross from a disability perspective.

[541] Cf. Frances Ryan, 'Disabled People Want to Live a Full Life. Instead, We're Forced to Scrap over Our Right to Food and a Wash', *The Guardian*, 15 July 2025, https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2025/jul/15/britain-disabled-people-right-food-politics.

While the previous analysis has understood obedience and sacrifice in relation to power, exploitation, and disabled embodiment, turning to Adam's sin allows the focus to centre to how to relate vulnerability and sin. As previously mentioned, Aquinas's soteriology centres on Christ's response to Adam's sin. To see how defiant joy might fit within this vision, it is necessary to examine Aquinas's account of Adam's sin, and the contrasting posture Christ adopts. Aquinas argued that Adam "sinned chiefly by coveting God's likeness as regards "knowledge of good and evil," … namely that by his own natural power he might decide what was good, and what was evil for him to do".[542] Furthermore, Adam sinned "by coveting God's likeness as regards his own power of operation, namely that by his own natural power he might act so as to obtain happiness." [543] For Aquinas, pride is the foundation of Adam's sin; Adam sought a knowledge that was beyond his limits as a creature.[544] Adam's refusal to accept his creaturely dependence opens a clear parallel with ableist frameworks that reject interdependence; but Aquinas locates this refusal specifically in the desire for knowledge beyond human limits. Both turn away from embodied interdependence: Adam refuses dependence on God; ableist frameworks refuse dependence on others.

To make a connection between ableism and pride, it is important to clarify that what follows is an interpretive development rather than a restatement of Aquinas's own position. Aquinas's interpretation Adam's sin centres on epistemic disobedience, a desire to know, but the narrative logic of Genesis presses the argument further. His sin is a refusal to accept that he is dependent, vulnerable, and has limits. It is the desire to be invulnerable. The story moves from intellectual transgression to an avoidance of embodied vulnerability: awareness of nakedness, attempts to cover, and withdrawal from relation. Aquinas frames Adam's sin primarily as seeking knowledge that would make one godlike; what matters for developing a disability Christology is what that knowledge is meant to secure: the abandonment of dependence and the dissolution of creatureliness.[545]

The knowledge made Adam and Eve aware of their nakedness (Gen. 3:7) or to put it differently, their vulnerability. The fruit does not create the vulnerability but reveals it. They become conscious that they are exposed. Vulnerability and shame are closely related, as Virginia Burrus writes, "Shame is at the heart of the anguished awareness of human limits at the

[542] Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.163.3.
[543] Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.163.3.
[544] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.163.1.
[545] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 2-2.163.1.

point where those limits are exceeded, conveying the power as well as the danger of relationality itself."[546] The putting on of makeshift clothes out of this awareness is not to be seen as simply shame about one's body but an attempt to control or conceal their vulnerability. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes, "Shame, as opposed to guilt, is a bad feeling that does not attach to what one does, but to what one is."[547] Furthermore, in hiding from God in verse 8, the desire is not merely conceal a transgression, but to escape the feelings of shame and vulnerability. This can be read in a variety of different ways. On one level, hiding can be understood as cutting oneself off from others and therefore, it can be read as an attempt to be independent. But it can also be read as a reaction to fear, retreating to protect oneself. In such a reading, the problem is not pride alone, but an attempt to maintain the status quo and protect oneself by withdrawing. Whether motivated by power or by fear, both responses reject the vulnerability that marks creaturely existence.

There is a tension with this reading of the narrative because the start of the rejection of dependency is earlier, in the act to eat the forbidden fruit. At the same time, rather than read these as cause and effect, they can be interpreted as two expressions of the same underlying impulse: a movement away from one's vulnerability. On one level, the eating of the fruit expresses a desire for knowledge and power, to be godlike. On another level, in creating makeshift clothes and hiding oneself indicates a shame of one's vulnerability and an attempt to declare oneself independent from God and other relationships. This reinterpretation of Adam's sin is not a radical departure from Aquinas's account, but it shifts the emphasis from an epistemic trespass to an anthropological refusal of creatureliness. Particularly if, as argued in Chapter Two (p.63) that the story of the birth of Eve questions the ideals of self-sufficiency and autonomy, then Adam's action represents a rejection of the already established idea that humanity is dependent. In striving to be Godlike, Adam does not simply reject God, he rejects his own humanity.

The question that comes from the reinterpretation of Adam's sin is how to understand Christ's response. As previously mentioned, Aquinas views Adam's sin as being that he sought to be Godlike, whereas Christ on the cross is the model of a perfect obedience. The challenge for disability theology is how to articulate Christ's vulnerability on the cross without

[546] Virginia Burrus, *Saving Shame: Martyrs, Saints, and Other Abject Subjects* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 4.
[547] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'Queer Performativity: Henry James's the Art of the Novel', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 1 (1993): 12.

romanticising the violence and suffering. He embraces the limits of humanity, but this embrace cannot erase the injustice of the cross. The passion narrative portrays Christ as not avoiding death, the ultimate instance that marks creation as vulnerable and contingent. As previously stated, the cross risks conflating disability with death, since disability has been portrayed as kind of social or symbolic death. This comparison is problematic, yet it exposes a shared cultural logic: both death and disability are to be avoided and depicted as failures to maintain control over the body. Dying is feared because it appears uncontrollable and potentially painful, but disability is frequently imagined as a fate worse than death: an existence defined by burden, dependence, or diminished autonomy. These assumptions are made explicit in debates over euthanasia and abortion following prenatal diagnosis, where disability and projected dependence are cited as justifications.[548] Against this logic, Christ's refusal to maintain bodily invulnerability is decisive. The idea must be rejected that Christ was in complete control throughout the passion; instead, Christ undergoes mental and physical vulnerability, and in doing so exposes that humanity does not consist in bodily mastery or security.

The passion narrative shows the attempt to control and humiliate Christ's body by the Roman soldiers. He is mocked by soldiers, chief priests, and passersby (Mark 15:16-32), and his inability to save himself is ridiculed. The injustice of the scene is that Christ is mocked for what is being done to him. His vulnerability is produced by violence and then used as grounds for further abuse. They have created a context that problematises his human vulnerability and mocked him for not having the power to overcome it. Christ's suffering and his cry were viewed in both Jewish and Hellenistic society as being undignified of a god, but they speak to the radical reality that God became a vulnerable creature.[549] He is shamed for his vulnerability and humanity, which according to the dominant cultures of the period, would undermine his authority.

Given the danger of defining persons solely through what is imposed upon their bodies, it is necessary to consider Christ's agency. There are challenges with how Christ's agency on the cross is understood. If vulnerability is central to Christ's humanity, then strong assertions of agency threaten to reframe suffering as volition rather than something imposed upon him. This

[548] Cf. Tim Stainton, 'Disability, Vulnerability and Assisted Death: Commentary on Tuffrey-Wijne, Curfs, Finlay and Hollins', *BMC Medical Ethics* 20, no. 89 (2019), https://doi.org/10.1186/s12910-019-0426-2; cf. Brent Waters, 'Disability and the Quest for Perfection: A Moral and Theological Enquiry', in *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (T & T Clark, 2007), 206.
[549] Cf. David W. Chapman, 'Perceptions of Crucifixion among Jews and Christians in the Ancient World', *Tyndale Bulletin* 51, no. 2 (2000): 315–35.

is particularly a concern for disability Christology, because disability is not something one elects; it is the product of embodied limits and social forces. If the crucifixion is interpreted as something Christ chooses, disability risks being misread as an act of self-harm. Aquinas avoids this pitfall by grounding Christ's action not in the will-to-power but in love. But there is a need to recognise that this agency cannot be thought of as being a power over the events that happened, rather it needs to be understood in the context of the larger incarnation, where the Son has made himself vulnerable by becoming human. This means that he hungers, thirsts and is vulnerable to the forces of others. The redemption that Christ brings does not require a strong man, rather the incarnation embraces humanity's weaknesses. The agency is the choice to be in solidarity with the oppressed and to challenge ideas of what it means to be human according to the world. Christ's agency on the cross is the decision to inhabit weakness in solidarity, refusing the bodily security.

This form of agency is not expressed through domination or escape, but through Christ's embodied posture in the passion narrative itself. It is in the concrete details of the crucifixion that this refusal of mastery becomes visible. Christ does not resist the soldiers and while this could be interpreted as a passive approach, the lack of retaliation does not prevent another kind of defiance and resistance. It is not a forceful defiance. In light of the reinterpretation of Adam's sin as a refusal of dependency and vulnerability, Christ embodies the opposite posture. He does not conceal or apologise for them but enters into them publicly. Burrus observes that there is a kind of blurriness between shame and shamelessness, and the latter can be a form of resistance. She writes shamelessness as:

> …. always at least as ambivalent as shame itself, balanced between a refusal and a willful embracing of shame. Whatever it is, it is not simply outside shame but is at once resistant to and continuous with it. Cultivating courage, shamelessness engages the fear of being shamed and thus also exposes the coercive force of shaming: as eye meets eye, defying shame's inhibition, shame is itself shamed. Yet the power of such challenging and transgressive ocular intimacy-the power of a reclaimed desire-derives from the same source as the inhibition itself. Shamelessness also engages self-humiliation, transforming it into a poignant, even defiant, acceptance of human finitude and vulnerability.[550]

Burrus's description of shamelessness clarifies how Christ's vulnerability on the cross resists the shame imposed on him. There is an acknowledgement that Christ is a victim of injustice and shaming, while not reducing him to a victim. Instead of fleeing or masking his vulnerability, Christ accepts it and thereby contests the logic that frames it as shameful. His vulnerability is part of the nature that he has taken on. He has not simply accepted the conditions that comes

[550] Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 3.

with being human, but there is a transformation, he shows that there is a dignity in being human with its vulnerability and therefore, questions the narratives put forward by those in power. His shamelessness interrogates the cultural preoccupation with self-sufficiency, strength, and bodily security. He has embraced weakness and questioned the preoccupation with bodily security.

The questioning of bodily security is not a rejection of bodily security in its entirety, but it is a questioning of a certain view of health. As noted in Chapter Two (pp.73-74), health is an imprecise term and there are questions about how it is defined. Moltmann observes that there is a problem when it is viewed as meaning that one has no infirmities. Health can become an idol that makes disability a hardship to avoided. In wanting a more just society, involves working towards some bodily security through access to food, clean water, healthcare, and safety from violence. But the idol of health, which on control, optimisation, and bodily invulnerability, is a different impulse from justice. It rests on the normative assumption that a person should be efficient and have a high-functioning body. This model misses other key aspects of wellbeing such as relationships, interdependence, and the building of what Moltmann calls "the strength to be human" whether one is ill or healthy.[551]

Health, understood as optimisation and bodily invulnerability, carries implicit norms about what a person should be. Hardwick, writing at the intersection of disability and race, notes that Black people have historically been seen as "inherently unhealthy" which ignores the racist systems that contributed to Black people's ill health. Simultaneously, advocacy for improving the health of Black people was instrumental, aimed at making them better workers in plantations. The health of Black people is about serving others.[552] As previously noted, the emergence of capitalism in America led to the valuing of efficiency and productivity, which leads to negative views of people with disabilities. Hardwick argues that health is not something that is owed to the world in order to be of value. There is a need to move away from a paradigm where some bodies' worth is based on their output.[553] Against this logic of bodily optimisation, the crucified Christ presents a radically different valuation of embodiment. On the cross, Christ's health offers no advantage. Christ's body is not a site of optimisation, but a place of exposure and solidarity.

[551] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 273.
[552] Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 77–78; Cf. Emilie M. Townes, *Breaking the Fine Rain of Death: African American Health Issues and a Womanist Ethic of Care* (Continuum, 1998), 81–144.
[553] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 78.

Having offered a reinterpretation of Christ's response to Adam, it is important to consider some of the critiques by feminist theorists of the sin of pride. The concern expressed by Valerie Saiving argues that treating pride as the foundational sin centres on men's experiences, whereas women often suffer not from self-centeredness but from self-erasure. Furthermore, it also presumes the innocence of passive women.[554] Their passivity is not virtue but constraint, and it cannot be treated as moral innocence. A parallel can be seen in the experiences of people with disabilities. Both women and disabled people may go along with narratives that frame them as fragile, but this is not a radical embrace of vulnerability but a defence mechanism in order to avoid the confrontation that involves greater vulnerability. This is shame rather than shamelessness.

Christ on the cross is shameless with his vulnerability. His refusal is not the passive acceptance of other's characterisations; but a public inhabiting of what is deemed shameful, transforming it into a claim of dignity. One might be concerned that this approach loses any sense of Christ as a victim, yet shamelessness takes what others have been declared as being shameful and accepts it and transforms the narrative. When it comes to Christ it is easy to see the transformation as the resurrection of the body, which will be considered in the next section, but the first transformation occurs in the passion itself: the reclaiming of one's identity. Or in keeping with the distinction between personhood and identity in Chapter Two (pp.70-71), it is a declaration of one's inherent dignity. One is not accepting the persecutors' narratives of shame. As Burrus writes "The performative politics of identity are inseparable from the complex dynamic of shaming, in which shame rebounds on the shamers, even as those shamed both shamelessly *accept* their shame and transform it into *something else*."[555] This "something else" is not best identified as pride, because pride language can drift toward the essentialisation of identity. Instead Burrus argues "*Dignity* might therefore better name the effects of a performative claiming of worthiness that converts shame to shamelessness while refusing the temptation of triumphalism."[556] In appealing to dignity, it is a statement of one's worth and is a counternarrative to the oppression and shame.

Disability pride does not merely revalue embodiment; it performs dignity publicly against the cultural scripts that mark disabled bodies as shameful. As discussed in Chapter One

[554] Cf. Saiving, 'The Human Situation', 104–6; cf. Susan Nelson Dunfee, 'The Sin of Hiding: A Feminist Critique of Reinhold Niebuhr's Account of the Sin of Pride', *Soundings: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 65, no. 3 (1982): 324.
[555] Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 42. Emphasis in original.
[556] Burrus, *Saving Shame*, 42. Emphasis in original.

(p.16), disability is not simply impairment but, for many, disability is also a cultural identity, which challenges the idea that disability is opposed to the good life. Pride in this context refers to the practice of challenging shame, not the sin. Disability pride does not deny the reality of hardship or unequal conditions; rather, it refuses the assumption that disability is a deficit to be masked, managed, or overcome.[557] Disability pride should be understood under the category of dignity, not sin. Like Burrus's account of shamelessness, disability pride publicly inhabits what dominant cultures regard as undesirable, reclaiming disabled embodiment as a site of belonging, community, and creativity. This reclaiming is not triumphalist but a declaration of dignity against narratives that confine worth to bodily optimisation or normality.

Against the logic that identifies the vulnerable body as failure or defect, the counternarrative makes clear that one is not simply the mark or wound but possesses a dignity that cannot be taken away. This perspective is grounded in Christ's kenotic assumption of human vulnerability, which addresses both the problem of pride and the problem of those who are compelled to hide themselves due to oppressive structures. Yet for the counternarrative to be felt and known is a constant struggle. The language of obedience does not imply that Christ has no sense of self, nor does it mean that he rejects his humanity, even when it is put to the test. Rather, framing Christ as defiant and shameless makes clear that he is not passive in the wake of violent oppression. Christ's experience of his suffering and dehumanisation should not be allowed to dominate one's understanding of Christ. The kenotic approach offered here is not one of mere emptying, it is the assumption of human nature and this grounds an ethic centred not on erasure of the self but on recognition and acceptance of the self in its limits. Kenosis, in this register, calls one to embrace one's embodied life, while remaining grounded in the reality of one's vulnerability.

This reinterpretation of Adam's sin means that Christ's response is the inverse of Adam's refusal: he assumes human nature with all its human vulnerabilities and does not try to escape it. There are challenges that come with this reinterpretation due to certain aspects of Aquinas's theology. In Chapter Two (§2.1.3), it was shown that Aquinas's anthropology takes a literal view of Genesis, resulting in an imagined prelapsarian humanity that does not have any defects, so disability does not exist prior to the Fall. This makes it very difficult to view disability as a positive or neutral form of human variation rather than a deviation from an original ideal. As a result, it becomes logical for Aquinas to argue that Christ's infirmities are

[557] Cf. Kenny, *My Body Is Not a Prayer Request*, 7; cf. Jane Morris, *Pride Against Prejudice: Transforming Attitudes to Disability* (The Women's Press, 1991), ch. 3.

accepted only in order to be healed. This creates the exact point where Christ's shameless embodiment becomes critical. The cross cannot be reduced to instrumental suffering for repair. It must disclose the dignity of vulnerable human life itself. Disability Christology must therefore begin where Aquinas cannot: with the affirmation that limits are not defects to be eliminated, but part of being human. On the cross, Christ does not evade human limitation but inhabits vulnerability, suffering, and oppression in their concrete form. This makes clear that Christ experiences human suffering and is in solidarity with humanity, but it also offers a counternarrative: the declaration that it is good to be human, to exist. The understanding that Christ, the Word, has taken on human nature is itself a declaration that there is a dignity to humanity with all its limitations, even on the cross, and that one's humanity is not to be escaped. The acceptance of human limits as being good is a declaration of the continual goodness of creation, even while it is in need of change and healing.

4.2.3. Rejecting the Compulsory Able-Bodiedness of Risen Bodies

In light of the preceding discussion, the resurrection of the body must be reassessed, particularly in relation to disability. In destroying death and suffering, the resurrection has often been interpreted to eliminate disability and vulnerability as well. Aquinas makes this assumption explicit in his view of risen bodies, where no privations remain. As Terrence Ehrman notes, Aquinas's framework entails that disability does not exist as creation becomes perfected.[558] For Aquinas, human mutability threatens perfection, since mutability implies susceptibility to corruption. Aquinas understands the risen body as incorruptible, beautiful, and perfectly agile.[559] Agility does not signify moving towards a need or goal, but the body's perfect responsiveness to the soul's will. In other words, agility is about perfect control over the body.[560] Michael Waddell observes that the attributes that Aquinas gives to the risen body are due to his metaphysical commitments, rather than cultural norms.[561] These attributes for Aquinas are not motivated by cultural contempt for impairment, but by his metaphysics of form overflowing into matter. When bodily perfection is understood as unimpeded responsiveness and resistance-free action, disability becomes definable only as privation, rather than a variation. The difficulty is that, even if unintended, Aquinas's account aligns perfection with able-bodied ideals: a body without impairment, resistance, or constraint. Part of Aquinas's

[558] Cf. Ehrman, 'Disability and Resurrection Identity', 737.
[559] Cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, html ed. Joseph Kenny, trans. Daniel Keating and Fabian R. Larcher, 15.6.988, https://isidore.co/aquinas/english/SS1Cor.htm.
[560] Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 4.86.3.
[561] Cf. Waddell, 'Thomas Aquinas and the Resurrection of the (Disabled) Body', 48.

justification for this understanding of risen bodies is that the glorified bodies experience and share the perfection of the glorified soul. At the resurrection, Aquinas understands "the body [to] be perfectly within the soul's dominion."[562] But this raises a theological problem: if bodily perfection entails the erasure of disability, then the resurrection risks normalising disabled bodies, and defining disability once again as a defect.

Rather than focus on risen bodies in general, the focus should be on the example of the risen Christ who still retains the wounds of the cross, which raises the question of whether the risen body needs to be thought of as unblemished. Aquinas does not interpret Christ's wounds as being any kind of defect; rather, they are "trophies of His power".[563] The wounds are not understood to diminish Christ but display his victory. The risen Christ is the same body now glorified; nothing has been lost or diminished, and thus no privation is present.[564] Aquinas can affirm Christ's scars because these specific wounds signify salvific victory. That narrow criterion makes it difficult him from considering whether other embodied differences, such as disability, might possess dignity beyond mere privation.

Eiesland offers an alternative understanding of the risen Christ's wounds, where they are marks of disability, identifying Christ as a survivor whose body continues to bear the marks of the injustice he endured.[565] There is the challenge of avoiding reducing disability to injustice and suffering with this identification. At the same time, Christ's wounds are revealing from a disability perspective because they challenge how risen bodies are often imagined. Risen bodies do not have to conform to ableist expectations. As Hardwick notes, Christ retains the marks of the cross, which the surrounding ancient cultures regarded as profoundly shameful.[566] It shows that God does not remove what is seen to be uncomfortable but continues to identify with those whose bodies are marked, marginalised, or resisted by social norms, even after the resurrection. Hardwick argues that disability can now be "a place of dignity and glory."[567] In keeping the wounds of the cross, there is an opportunity to challenge the normative ideals of what makes a

[562] Aquinas, *SCG*, 4.87.5.
[563] Aquinas, *ST*, 3.54.4. This resonates with Aquinas's treatment of Adam's rib which was discussed in Chapter Two (p.59), where Aquinas does not view Adam as having received a wound or loss from the experience. The difference seems to be that Aquinas had to acknowledge Christ's wounds because they are referred to in John 20:27, whereas Genesis does not describe a lasting wound. In both cases, Aquinas is careful not to suggest a privation of a good, whether in prelapsarian or risen humanity.
[564] Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 3.54.1; 3.54.2.
[565] Cf. Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 101.
[566] Cf. Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 113.
[567] Hardwick, *How Ableism Fuels Racism*, 113.

good body. Christ has taken on what has been deemed to be shameful and shown that God has embraced these marks shamelessly.

In understanding the resurrection as being bodily, there is a need to do justice to the reality of the body. As noted earlier, Aquinas restricts creaturely limitation to a narrow register: most vulnerabilities are classified as postlapsarian defects rather than expressions of embodied finitude. Primarily, for Aquinas, contingency and finitude refer to the condition of being created by God. Even within Aquinas's narrow framing, the risen body remains a creature. Though some contingent needs may cease, the risen body remains dependent on God and therefore limited according to its nature. The idea of beatific vision implies that some limits based on one's nature remain; therefore, this does not require that the body has become limitless. Affirming the persistence of creaturely limits is essential; otherwise, the resurrection becomes a mandate for able-bodiedness. Brent Waters, writing on genetic enhancements and disability, observes that the notion of perfection is often envisioned as "the absence of any external constraints upon the will."[568] Waters' account of perfection as unimpeded will resonates with Aquinas's description of agility insofar as both imagine the perfected body as one in which resistance disappears. This logic reframes difference as defect to be removed, rather than as part of the good of embodied creatureliness. Under such a framework, the resurrection is interpreted as the elimination of impairment rather than the restoration of human belonging to God.

It is therefore essential to distinguish between the vulnerabilities that express creaturehood and those that are a result of injustice. Dependency on God is not a temporary condition of fallen life, but intrinsic to being a creature; it persists before and after the resurrection. After the resurrection, human fragility might not be experienced as acutely, but it is not an end to human dependency on God. Retaining that continued sense of being a creature helps to ensure that in imagining the eschaton, it is not about a denial or overcoming the current reality entirely.

Brock offers an important corrective to eschatology by recentring it on the "givenness" of disabled life. Rather than asking what a disabled person will be like in heaven, Brock argues that Christian hope should be shaped by how one receives and honours the disabled person now.[569] Emphasising Christ's humanity and creatureliness helps resist giving the cross and

[568] Waters, 'Disability and the Quest for Perfection', 209.
[569] Cf. Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 191–92.

resurrection a curative or supercrip logic: Christ continually affirms the value of embodied limits. Such givenness is not a provisional condition, but a theological affirmation of creaturely embodiment, good now and fulfilled in the resurrection, without requiring the erasure of human limits.

Conclusion

To conclude, this chapter has examined how the cross can connect with the experience of disability. While it is crucial to keep the suffering and the injustice of the cross, this alone is not enough: a counternarrative is required to challenge suffering and reclaim human dignity. In Christ sharing human suffering, he offers solidarity with the victims of history, but solidarity must extend beyond the mere sharing of pain. The cross must be interpreted so that suffering is not the full story, and this affirmation cannot be deferred until the resurrection. Disability may involve suffering, but suffering must not be allowed to define disability. This provides a key insight for a theology of the cross, that it must uphold this tension between suffering and joy. The suffering is real, yet it should not dominate one's understanding of both Christ and people with disabilities. Vulnerability and human limits must be reclaimed as aspects of creaturely life, rather than problems to be corrected; the injustice lies not in the body itself, but in the structures that weaponise it.

Moltmann's theology of the cross provides an interpretation that focuses not just on what happens to the body of Christ, but on how the cross impacts all three persons of the Trinity. Moltmann does not keep suffering and vulnerability from the Trinity. In his account, God participates in suffering rather than remaining distant. Divine vulnerability is presented as being without deficit, and thus, in theory, allows for a greater appreciation of vulnerability in general. But God's vulnerable love is different to the vulnerability of being disabled. In the latter, vulnerability arises from one's constitution, whereas in the former it is due to a commitment to another. The incarnation brings these two forms of vulnerability into relation, showing that God enters into the situation of humanity without safeguarding himself. However, the sustained emphasis Moltmann places on suffering risks letting suffering dominate the entire account of the cross, with resolution deferred to the eschaton.

While Moltmann's account of the passion narrative does not ignore the external aspects of the cross, his primary focus is on the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father loves the Son, yet abandons him; this transforms Christ's cry of dereliction from subjective anguish into an ontological fracture, collapsing vulnerability into deprivation. In Moltmann's account, Christ fears the Father and still submits to the crucifixion, a dynamic that undermines his agency and makes Christ a victim. This stands in sharp contrast to Aquinas, for whom Christ's relinquishing of proper goods is chosen rather than imposed. While Aquinas risks giving Christ too much agency, thus undermining his vulnerability, the crucial value of his theology of the cross from a disability perspective is his insistence that Christ is not merely a victim of circumstances. Moltmann does not deny Christ's agency, yet his portrayal of Christ as godforsaken intensifies helplessness, and with it a sense of disability as deprivation.

The cry on the cross is where the real protest against suffering occurs. It remains an accusation directed toward the Father. In Moltmann's account, Christ relates to human suffering through the breakdown of the relationship between the Father and the Son. Once this fracturing is treated as real rather than subjective experience, the tension between Christ's perception and the ongoing love and support of the Father is lost. In withdrawing the Father's presence, Christ experiences a loss of his identity. There is a creation of an absence, of a deficit, which can be read as making Christ disabled. Moltmann's relational framing limits his ability to provide a counternarrative, because it makes the subjective feelings of Christ an objective reality. While Moltmann understands God's love as a constant and expects there will be future reconciliation, he has nevertheless brought the structures of ableism into the Trinity, rather than using the Trinity as a space to contradict those structures.

The concern over the emphasis on suffering in Moltmann's theology of the cross was a criticism that he addressed later in his career by giving a greater role to the Spirit. The Spirit becomes a source of support for Christ on the cross, providing strength and hope. The counternarrative is most clearly seen in Moltmann's understanding that the Spirit gives a love for life, which, given the emphasis on Christ's suffering, helps to underscore the value of life, even when the suffering is overwhelming. When disabled lives are judged as not being worth living, the Spirit's affirmation functions to contradict these narratives. Furthermore, it makes clear that Christ is not alone. It shows that Christ is neither self-sufficient nor independent and thus cannot be cast as a supercrip who triumphs over suffering.

The Spirit's expanded role attempts to address Christ's isolation, but it does not repair the rupture between Father and Son; it merely replaces the absent Father with another source of support. Moltmann's approach is undermined if the Father and the Son are united, as there would be a shared understanding rather than a gulf between them. Christ's suffering is largely caused by the absence of the Father and Moltmann does not want to let the wounds of the cross heal prematurely. Yet this absence risks repeating the logic of the medical model of disability, in which disability arises from a lack or deficit within the person. In this framework, Christ is largely defined as victim, in a way that renders him disabled by the Father's absence.

Even more fundamentally, the disabling logic persists because Moltmann defines Christ through his relationships and their absence. This prevents Moltmann from adopting other approaches such as a two-nature approach which would allow for differentiation between what Christ experiences in his human nature and the Trinitarian perspective. By refusing the differentiation, Moltmann collapses the immanent Trinity into Christ's experience of abandonment. While Moltmann insists that opposition to the cross comes from the future, this means that in the present moment Christ is defined primarily by absence rather than sustained relationality. But for people with disabilities, there is a need to define disability as not only suffering and injustice but as part of a good life. The point of connection to the cross cannot be just in Christ's feelings of what he lacked, otherwise it reinforces the very narratives disabled people must resist.

In the final section, the focus turned to Aquinas whose work has many challenges from a disability perspective but simultaneously offers resources for articulating a counternarrative in which suffering and joy coexist. The biggest challenge is that, although Aquinas allows for Christ to suffer, Christ's body retains its strength and is not impaired by suffering. There is an unwillingness by Aquinas, despite his belief in the infirmities of Christ, to allow Christ to be materially vulnerable. Aquinas understands Christ as experiencing a mixed state, where there is both pain and the knowledge of the resurrection. He suffers and is joyful. The inclusion of joy has genuine potential as a counternarrative to the suffering, signalling that pain is not the whole story. The problem lies in Aquinas's position that Christ's abilities are not impacted by his suffering: Christ suffers but it does not hinder him. Grace and beatific vision should not remove vulnerability, yet according to Aquinas Christ's vulnerability appears only insofar as Christ wills it. There is a need to allow Christ to have less control over his own experience, as this underscores the reality of human nature. This would not diminish Christ's agency, rather it is a recognition that human agency is subject to limits. From a disability perspective, it is crucial

that being subject to limits is normalised as part of human life. Beatific vision and grace cannot be allowed to overcome those limits.

As part of this recognition that grace and vulnerability are not curative, there is a need to allow for a greater degree of struggle on the cross. This makes clear that the joy of the cross is not easy, but a form of resistance. Joy is a statement of worth and dignity despite forces that attempt to say otherwise. For Aquinas, the beatific vision ensures Christ's human agency and the unity of his wills, but it is necessary to acknowledge the wider context of the cross and allow it to place pressure upon Christ's experience of that vision. Christ may be certain in knowledge, but he remains subject to temporality; mutability means that he can both know God fully and yet struggle to feel the consolation of that knowledge. Christ on the cross feels the limits of human nature. He is struggling because of the conditions rather than an absence of knowledge. It means that joy is not automatic, but something Christ must actively hold onto. This dynamic fits with the insights of both Jennings and Hardwick, which sees joy as a work and a form of resistance. If joy is framed as a work, it risks suggesting Christ overcomes suffering like a supercrip. However, joy is not about overcoming human vulnerability. Furthermore, defiant joy does not prevent there being a role for the Spirit and grace but means that they support Christ in his limits rather than cure him of those limits. Defiant joy fits the two-nature framework precisely because it recognises what suffering does to the flesh of Christ, who endures it as humans do, but there is a need for a level of transcendence, this allows one to declare that suffering is not the whole story of what it means to be human or disabled.

It was necessary to assess whether defiant joy risks undermining Aquinas's soteriology because of its emphasis on Christ's obedience, which contrasts with Adam's pride. There are reasons for hesitancy when it comes to obedience, sacrifice, and pride because the feminist criticisms of them are also applicable to people with disabilities. These topics often centre on the experience of self-centeredness by able-bodied men, which does not always align with the experiences of people who have been taught not to make themselves a burden on others and to minimise their needs. While one can point to Aquinas's view that obedience to God ultimately takes precedence over obedience to earthly authorities, this is not enough, because it is in the cross of Christ that the issue of passivity and the surrender of one's own interests is most sharply confronted. Christ's obedience helps emphasise that he consents to what happens to him. Furthermore, Aquinas understands sacrifice as primarily being about obedience rather than bloodshed. Christ's obedience does not mean that Christ gives up his free will but rather he

sacrifices the will to proper goods such as life. While this could be understood to make one compliant, there are circumstances that may call for sacrifice of goods such as bodily security.

Part of the reason for Christ's obedience in Aquinas is a reaction to Adam's pride, which Aquinas understands as wanting to be God-like, rejecting his natural power and his dependency on God. This chapter has suggested a reinterpretation of Adam's sin that centres not only on self-exaltation but on a refusal of creaturely vulnerability. The desire to be godlike is the desire to no longer be vulnerable and dependent on others, and therefore, there is a clear overlap with ableist values. The covering of the body and the hiding, on one level, can be read as an extension of the pride of Adam, because it suggests that one is attempting to cut oneself off from others. Yet this concealment may also arise not from pride but from a shame that seeks to avoid burdening others. Where Adam and Eve can be read as trying to protect themselves, Christ is willing to be vulnerable, even to death. While there has been hesitancy to link death and disability, the point here is not to say that disability is like death; rather, both expose the

Christ on the cross does not possess bodily security and this is largely because of the actions of others. Yet there is a question of why one should expect Christ to be anything other than a vulnerable human with limits; this is the very nature Christ has taken on. Therefore, while Christ might seem passive, he refuses to be shamed for what it means to be human. He challenges those who mock him by embracing human finitude. This is not to say that the mockers are correct, but that in embracing his limits and vulnerability he confronts the values of self-sufficiency and strength. He questions a certain understanding of health and well-being. Health is often tightly connected to one's efficiency, becoming the basis of one's worth. But Christ's health does nothing for him, and it does not determine his value. Christ is not filled with shame but is shameless in his vulnerability and limits. He does not hide them but shows that there is a dignity that cannot be taken away. This is emphasised by Aquinas's approach to kenosis, which does not focus on the removal of qualities but on the taking on of human nature. It emphasises the acceptance of one's humanity with its limits. In revealing his limits rather than concealing them, Christ refuses the shame that disabled people are taught to internalise and exposes it instead as a cultural judgment, not a theological truth.

Finally, while the approach to this chapter has been to focus on the Good Friday narrative rather than moving to the resurrection, it was necessary to examine how this reinterpretation might impact the resurrection. As the resurrection is understood to bring an end

to death and suffering and lead to human perfection, it can be interpreted as meaning the end of disabilities. Aquinas's position that risen bodies will be perfectly agile risks framing the resurrection as normalising the bodies of disabled people because that they are thought to lack nothing. Yet Christ's wounds remaining after the resurrection complicate how one understands the ideal body. Aquinas does not attribute these as a privation of a good because of their soteriological context, but their visibility raises questions about what constitutes a perfect body and whether bodies that are currently deemed shameful should be viewed that way. Finally, there is a need to recognise that creaturely dependence on God remains unchanged even after the resurrection. Human limitation continues, as suggested by Aquinas's understanding of the beatific vision: knowledge is perfected, but finitude persists. Keeping this sense of limits and dependency on God is important because it ensures that the resurrection does not become about denying the goodness of creation now; instead, the resurrection does not have to be about the normalisation of the disabled body. One continues to possess limits.

Having argued in this chapter that Christ's suffering is to be understood as belonging to his humanity rather than his divinity, how Christ's two natures relate to each other now demands further attention. Taking a non-competitive approach, it has to be considered whether this approach encourages self-sufficiency and devalues the status of those who need others, or if it has the potential to speak to the creature's givenness. It does not focus on what is lacking but on the gift of creation. This chapter has also observed some of the problems of identifying an absence in Christ, and it needs to be considered, beyond the context of the crucifixion, how the identification of such absence impacts the concept of relation and personhood. To address these emergent concerns, the next chapter turns from suffering to power: it interrogates divine omnipotence itself, asking whether God's aseity and agency can be articulated in a way that neither cures nor compensates human vulnerability, but recognises it as gift.

Chapter Five

Avoiding Divine Ableism: Examining the Relationship between Divinity and Humanity

Introduction

One of the remaining questions for this project is how to understand the relationship between Christ's divinity and humanity. Throughout the previous two chapters, it has been argued that it is necessary to take seriously the vulnerability and limits of Christ's human nature, even while recognising that it is unique, but the question of how this humanity relates to his divinity has largely been left unanswered. For a disability Christology, this question is important because it determines how Christ can be said to relate to disability. Specifically, it will impact whether Christ is understood to be disabled in both natures or only in his humanity. The danger is not the presence of two natures, but the assumption that one exists to correct what is lacking in the other. The hypostatic union cannot be conceived as compensatory: neither nature supplies what the other lacks, for each is complete according to its mode of being; they are united in the person of the Word without contraction, replacement, or restoration. Avoiding the risk of a compensatory Christology is therefore the primary task of this chapter.

In order to avoid a compensatory Christology, it is necessary to address how God's power is understood, because what is at stake is whether the doctrine of God itself functions in an ableist way. The chapter therefore begins by reconsidering omnipotence because questions of divine power are central to whether theology privileges autonomy, strength, and self-sufficiency. It has been argued that claiming God is omnipotent risks treating independence and strength as perfections and therefore construing disabled people as imperfect.[570] This continues Chapter Four's critique of attempts to escape vulnerability through ideals of strength. The question, therefore, is whether omnipotence itself must be revised or whether certain aspects of divine power have instead been neglected. The second reason is the concern that omnipotence does not allow creation to be a genuinely free Other. While this may not seem immediately relevant to disability, it concerns whether the integrity of creation is respected. The inherent challenge is that people with disabilities, like all of creation, need the help of others but at the same time, the help does not have a curative dimension. Consequently, God's power needs to be

[570] Cf. Cooper, 'The Disabled God', 175.

understood in a way compatible with creation's integrity. This is important in itself but also because it opens onto the relationship between Christ's two natures. Throughout, the argument seeks to preserve distinction without opposition: between God and creation, divine and human agency, and Christ's two natures. These concerns converge on a single question: whether divine power can be understood in a way that honours creaturely integrity without subordinating vulnerability to strength.

The chapter therefore begins with God's relationship to creation rather than with Christ directly. This is a necessary first step for understanding how Christ's humanity stands in relation to the divine. Many of the concerns surrounding Christ's humanity also arise in discussions of omnipotence and creation, especially regarding human freedom. The argument therefore begins by examining transcendence, including Aquinas's claim that God has no real relation with creation. Disability theologians have been critical of self-sufficiency and independence and from this perspective, a Thomistic account of transcendence may initially appear to reinforce ableist norms. However, it is also necessary to see what transcendence does for creation, particularly how it can emphasise that creation is a gift. It does not serve any purpose for God. Rather than reinforcing ableism, transcendence may instead emphasise the goodness of existence apart from usefulness or productivity. This account of gift not only challenges the assumption that divine self-sufficiency must be rejected but also provides a framework for understanding omnipotence. The act of creation is illustrative for understanding God's power because it reveals the key aspect of God's power and why it does not make sense to describe it as dominating. From a disability perspective, the idea that God creates out of gratuity will be advanced to help to emphasise that creation's worth is not based on anything that humans do.

A further concern is whether a gift-giving model risks collapsing into paternalism by reducing humanity to passive reception. The issue is therefore not simply whether divine omnipotence is compatible with human agency, but how creaturely agency and integrity are to be understood within the divine-human relationship. Aquinas's account of causation suggests that God does not contradict human causation because divine and human causes work on different levels. At the same time, there remains the question of whether the singularity of divine action risks obscuring the goodness and integrity of creation. As observed in the previous chapter, eschatological perfection can place pressure on present creaturely existence. The chapter therefore briefly draws on David Kelsey's distinction between different registers of divine action in order to preserve creaturely integrity without collapsing all divine action into a

single curative logic. But it is not simply whether divinity is compatible with human agency, but what the status of human agency is. To develop this, Lisa Powell's argument that care involves reciprocity challenges models of gift that reduce the receiver to passivity and thus directly interrogates the kind of gift that is being proposed in this chapter.

The subsequent section turns to social ontology, which many disability theologians regard as a resource because it shifts attention away from rationality as the basis of personhood. Yet there remains the question of whether this merely substitutes one capacity for another, making relational capacity the new basis of personhood. This section focuses on Moltmann's theology because, as the two previous chapters have shown, he understands personhood as constituted through relations and their absence, which from a disability perspective requires closer scrutiny. Moltmann's emphasis on history risks reducing people to their relations and therefore construing relational limitation as deficiency. Comparing Moltmann's account with John Swinton's work helps clarify how relationships relate to personhood. One of the difficulties is that human relationships fail, and this is why Swinton views the relationship between God and the human person as being paramount. Yet the question arises whether Moltmann's eschatological orientation and interpretation of the cross prevents him from sufficiently recognising God's presence now. Finally, the section engages with Robert Spaemann's concept of humanity in order to establish an account of humanity that resists reducing the person to intellectual or social capacities.

After examining humanity's relationship with God, the chapter's focus shifts to Christology. There is a need to understand Christ's humanity as possessing its own integrity so that it is clear that it does not lack anything. While the integrity of Christ's humanity is an important topic in itself, it is particularly important for a disability Christology as it is necessary to argue that Christ's human nature with its limits and vulnerabilities is respected. Christ's divinity has the potential to function in a curative way where it makes up for the deficit located in one nature and supplied by the other. It is necessary to consider the otherness of Christ's humanity to make clear that the incarnation means taking on a nature that is different from his divinity. Moltmann's approach to the communication of idioms stresses the unity of Christ's humanity and divinity to the point that they become difficult to distinguish. When read alongside his Trinitarian theology, this raises the question of whether he sufficiently maintains the integrity of Christ's human nature as distinct from his divinity. Even when framed as interpenetration rather than absorption, the risk remains that Christ is imagined as possessing deficits for which the other nature must compensate. The issue is therefore not escaping

creaturely limits but respecting them. This recognition also returns to the question of agency and grace, not as correctives for deficiency, but as modes of relation that honour creaturely vulnerability.

Having argued that there is a need for Christ's human nature to be respected, the attention turns to how to understand the divine working within Christ's humanity. Rather than centring the divine action on repairing or correcting human nature, this chapter argues for a model of assistance that honours human limits without erasing them. In this context, the experience of mobility aid users offers resources for thinking about help that respects the limits of one's nature rather than attempting to cure it. The focus is not on finding a gap and filling it, but on enabling a way of living in which limits are acknowledged, supported, and retained. Such experiences also clarify a further concern: that Christ's divinity and the Spirit's grace might be interpreted as conferring an advantage, insulating him from vulnerability rather than sustaining him within it. The chapter will return to the question of human agency and examine how the image of a mobility aid illustrates how divine assistance does not overpower or supersede the user's agency, therefore suggesting a form of divine agency that enables without coercion.

Finally, the chapter will ask how God can be thought of as disabled and what theological and conceptual challenges arise in linking God and disability. Many disability theologians have argued that speaking of God through the image of disability offers a way to challenge ableist norms, but the question is how to make the connection between God and disability. It will begin by considering whether Aquinas's idea of analogy provides a framework for making the connection between God and disability. However, a major challenge is determining what aspects of disability can be related to God. There is a very real danger that calling God disabled could essentialise disability and reinforce normative expectations about what counts as a 'good' disabled person. This final section will finish by arguing that while God cannot be said to be disabled in the sense of it being an attribute, this does not mean that disability is an inappropriate image through which to think about God, particularly because God is committed to the marginalised. The commitment is so great that Christ took on a human nature with all its limits and vulnerabilities.

5.1. Divine Power as Divine Gift-Giving

5.1.1. The Self-Sufficiency of God and the Gift of Creation

Questions of divine power are fundamentally about how to understand the relationship between God and the world, and therefore require an investigation of how relations are understood. This section examines where disability theology appears to come into conflict with classical theism, focusing on Aquinas's treatment of aseity, transcendence, and omnipotence. It is particularly important for disability theology because it interacts with several key questions. First, the question of whether an omnipotent God is dominating and therefore risks undermining the integrity of creation through his force. God is the epitome of the able-bodied person who makes up for the deficits within creation. This leads to the second question, whether an omnipotent and self-sufficient God promotes ableist values, such as independence. Third, it must be asked whether it risks making creation irrelevant if God is not understood to need creation. These three concerns are not separate objections but as variations on a single underlying issue: whether divine self-sufficiency imports an ideal of independence. As previously discussed, one of the difficulties for disabled people is that their actions and agency are not sufficiently acknowledged and instead they are portrayed as burdens. While creation may not be regarded as a burden on God, the question remains whether a similar dynamic can be seen in God's relationship with the world because creation does nothing for God.

One of the most challenging aspects of Aquinas's theology is the claim that God cannot be understood to be in real relation with humanity.[571] Real relation cannot be attributed to God because it is understood to be an inherent quality. For creatures, relation is inherent: they are constituted through dependence on God and one another.[572] God, however, is described by Aquinas as having "no need of the things that He had made".[573] Creation does not add anything to God because of God's aseity, meaning that God exists in and of himself. For Aquinas, denying a real relation in God is not a denial of all relations; it only denies that creatures can modify God's being. Aquinas understands God as being *ipsum esse subsistens,* meaning that he is subsisting in himself. The essence of a creature is caused by another, but this is not the case for God who is pure *esse*. The result is that God's action is not about achieving self-actualisation. He already possesses every perfection.[574] Many theologians, including Moltmann, have argued that conceiving of God as fully realised and changeless prevents God from being

[571] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13.7; 1.28.1.
[572] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.28.1.
[573] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.73.2.
[574] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.2.4.

compassionate, suffering out of love for creation.[575] As will become clear throughout this section, divine transcendence concerns the mode of relation, not its absence. The challenge is that this approach suggests that creation is irrelevant to who God is. As critics have argued, divine self-sufficiency can be interpreted as promoting the values of ableism and therefore as requiring a different model of God. This section therefore asks whether Aquinas's account of divine transcendence and aseity must be read as ableist, or whether they can be the basis of a theology of gift in which existence, with its limits, is affirmed as good without reference to utility or capacity.

Aquinas's understanding of God as being self-sufficient stands in tension with many disability theologians who want to stress the value of interdependence rather than independence. Eiesland's theology challenges the idea that God is omnipotent and self-sufficient with her image of "God in a sip-puff wheelchair".[576] Eiesland's image of God provokes a reconsideration of what one desires in God. Powell argues that Eiesland's image challenges the idea of an omnipotent God in a way that ensures that God is still seen as "active," and possesses "power and ability."[577] She writes that, "Because disability theologians reject self-sufficiency and independence as ultimate values, these qualities are not given supreme status as attributes of God."[578] According to this reading, the God of classical theism corresponds with the "Western ideal human".[579] Similarly, Creamer has argued that understanding God as possessing limits counters the narrative that disability means that one is "incomplete" and would allow the focus to shift away from omnipotence.[580] The shared criticism by all three theologians is that the classical understanding of God promotes self-sufficiency. Such a model supports the ideal of the self-made man, and treats those who require assistance, such as people with disabilities, as being inferior. The assumption within disability theology is that omnipotence and aseity are to be rejected because they result in a problematic anthropology. However, the question remains whether aseity and omnipotence function in this way within Aquinas's metaphysics. This leads to the further question of whether the need to respect human limits and interdependence are contrary to divine self-sufficiency.

[575] Cf. Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 277.
[576] Eiesland, *The Disabled God*, 89.
[577] Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 18–19.
[578] Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 37.
[579] Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 37.
[580] Cf. Creamer, *Disability and Christian Theology*, 112.

To begin to evaluate God's self-sufficiency, it is necessary to start with divine transcendence as it is key for understanding how God relates to the world. How transcendence is conceptualised determines whether divine otherness reinforces or disrupts ableist binaries of independence and dependence. Modern theology has tended to place a greater emphasis on God's immanence. However, there is a continual need to think about transcendence, because it means addressing the asymmetry between God and the world. The difference between God and creation is in jeopardy of being lost unless transcendence is explicitly affirmed. However, not all concepts of transcendence are equal. Kathryn Tanner observes how Christian theology transformed the Greek understandings of transcendence. One approach treats properties of divinity as universals in which one may participate. There is no real distinction between divinity and the world here, because divinity is being treated as univocal.[581] This version of transcendence brings divinity into the same order of being as the world. Another ancient approach to transcendence is contrastive, where divinity is thought to be in opposition to the world, where the latter is physical and in the process of becoming whereas the divine is eternal, intelligible, and unchangeable. But in understanding divine in contrast to the world, there must be a separation between the two and therefore, God can only act indirectly or through intermediate agencies.[582]

At first glance, a transcendence through a contrast between God and humanity would seem to be the greater temptation for a Christian theologian. God is all powerful whereas humanity is dependent. However, there are several problems with a contrastive transcendence. Firstly, the contrast does not allow for God and creation to meet and therefore, it undermines the incarnation, since Christ could only be understood to be an intermediary envoy. This leads to the second problem which is that these kinds of statements rely on a contrast and place God in a binary. The result is that God is limited by what he is defined against and therefore, depends upon the very opposite to which he is contrasted. Contrastive transcendence does not simply describe divine otherness, but actively constructs God through opposition, thereby reproducing the same binary logic that disability theology seeks to unsettle.

There is a need to go further and affirm the otherness of God to such a degree that he is beyond any binaries. Aquinas argues God is a unique being; he transcends every genus. He is

[581] Cf. Kathryn Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology: Tyranny or Empowerment* (Basil Blackwell, 1988), 39–40.
[582] Cf. Tanner, *God and Creation in Christian Theology*, 42–44.

not simply a different type of being.[583] As Henk Schoot writes, "God differs differently." [584] God's transcendence has often been interpreted as meaning that he is totally other, however, to avoid the suggestion that God does not relate to creation, the better phrase is that he is Not Other. As Ian McFarland argues, this helps to avoid any suggestion of a contrast and make clear that there is another option to God simply identifying or being opposed to creation.[585] Transcendence preserves divine uniqueness without requiring a contrastive binary.

This account of transcendence resists any binary that defines one term through oppositional difference. A transcendence that does not accept binaries provides a significant challenge to the medical model of disability. On the most basic level, it means God should not be identified with the non-disabled. The medical model deems an individual as disabled based on a contrast with "normal functioning" humans. They are an Other based on the contrast of those possessing the same genus. God can be regarded as an Other to the world, but there is no antithesis to God to suggest he is disabled or not. The question of how disability can be understood to relate to divinity will be explored at the end of this chapter in more depth; what matters at this point is that understanding God as beyond these binaries allows for the questioning of what is deemed as normative for humans. It means that there is the possibility to affirm that there are many kinds of ways to be human without upholding any kind of hierarchy as justified by God. Yet the question remains whether this theological challenge can dislodge the social binary in practice.

While God is beyond human categories, the preference is for language that appeals more to power and strength than vulnerability and weakness. It is true that people with disabilities possess strength, and that non-disabled people are vulnerable, however, the cultural associations of this binary mean that *prima facie,* the transcendent and omnipotent God would appear closer to the non-disabled person. The version of transcendence that is being argued for makes clear that God is unique and does not rely upon any contrast. Nevertheless, even when affirming transcendence and apophatic nature of God, declaring God all-powerful continues to risk making God appear other to disability. There continues to be the challenge of how divine strength is envisioned.

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[583] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.4.3.
[584] Henk J. M. Schoot, *Christ the 'Name' of God: Thomas Aquinas on Naming Christ* (Peeters Leuven, 1993), 144.
[585] Cf. Ian McFarland, 'The Gift of the Non Aliud: Creation from Nothing as a Metaphysics of Abundance', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 21, no. 1 (2019): 46.

While transcendence allows God to be thought beyond the binary of disabled and non-disabled, there continues to be the question of how to understand God's relationship with the world. While Aquinas does not view God as having a real relation with the world, he nevertheless maintains that God, as creator and sustainer, stands in relation to it. The point is to differentiate God from his creatures. As John Webster points out it is a denial that God relates in the same way that creation relates to God.[586] It needs to be said clearly that God is in relation with the world but in a mode unlike any creaturely relation. Transcendence does not prevent God from relating to his people. God's relationship with the world does not constitute his being, but this does not make him distant or aloof. As Michael Dodds writes, "As the source of created being, God is most intimately present to each thing. His presence is far more intimate than what is possible between the terms of mutually real relation among creatures."[587] Marcel Mauss's work on the gift is useful in his observation that to give a gift to someone "is to make a present of some part of oneself."[588] Understanding creation as a gift requires a close relationship with the giver, even when maintaining divine transcendence.

This closeness between God and creation is reflected in Aquinas's theology. Creation is understood to be closely related to God's presence as he writes that, "For an agent must be joined to that wherein it acts immediately and touch it by its power; …the thing moved and the mover must be joined together… Therefore, as long as a thing has being, God must be present to it".[589] God's touch is to be understood differently because creaturely touch is embodied and limited. God's touch is a "contact of power" which can be regarded as being akin to an emotion touching a person. Simon Oliver argues that this kind of touch "is crucial, for it indicates most clearly the radical intimacy between moving creation and God as its origin and sustainer."[590] Therefore, Aquinas's position not only understands God as being in a relationship but one of incomparable intimacy.

While the question of how transcendence does not prevent an intimate relationship with creation has been addressed, this account of intimacy does not resolve the concerns about divine

[586] Cf. John Webster, '"Love Is Also a Lover of Life": Creatio Ex Nihilo and Creaturely Goodness', *Modern Theology* 29, no. 2 (2019): 165.
[587] Michael Dodds, *The Unchanging God of Love: Thomas Aquinas and Contemporary Theology on Divine Immutability* (The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), 169.
[588] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (Routledge, 2002), 16.
[589] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.8.1.
[590] Simon Oliver, *Philosophy, God and Motion* (Routledge, 2005), 102; Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.105.2.

omnipotence and self-sufficiency. To begin, Aquinas's account of omnipotence follows from his understanding of God as pure act. As a result, passive power, understood as receptivity to change, cannot be attributed to God as it suggests that one is "deficient and imperfect."[591] In this framework, perfection is understood as fullness of actuality, "not wanting in actuality".[592] The concern, then, is whether a God defined by pure actuality reinforces a model of power that flows downward: establishing independence as ideal and dependence as deficiency. Modern theologians such as Moltmann have argued that the God of classical theism risks mirroring the power of the emperor: an emperor may give to his people, but he is above them and unaffected by them.[593] In this reading, divine omnipotence is unilateral rather than relational, eliminating reciprocity. Anna Mercedes views the omnipotence of classical theism as "power over"; it is understood "to dominate" and "to be positioned over others".[594] If divine power is imagined in this way, the asymmetry threatens divine benevolence because there is a lack of respect for creation.

God's power cannot be separated from his goodness and as a result, his power cannot be akin to any power to dominate. This becomes clearest in the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo.* Davies describes Aquinas's position as being that "divine omnipotence is grounded in his notion of God as being the source of the *esse* of creatures, his notion of God as making things to exist and therefore, as being *able* to make things to exist."[595] God's creative act differs from human creation which uses pre-existent finite materials. Creation from nothing requires God to be unlimited, otherwise there would be a need for something else to exist. According to Aquinas, the fullness of God's being is required in order to be the ultimate cause of what exists. God is the cause of everything's *esse*, for "as long as they are preserved in being."[596] Because the creature's existence depends wholly on God's act of giving *esse,* some theologians have interpreted this asymmetry as a form of domination. For example, Catherine Keller understands *creatio ex nihilo* as oppressive, because it imposes order rather than allowing creation to free and chaotic.[597] Yet domination presupposes a prior subject over which power is exercised, and prior to creation there is none. It is in this sense that Rowan Williams is correct to say that "creation is not an exercise of divine *power*".[598] It cannot correspond to tyrannical understandings of power. Creation, therefore, is an expression of divine plenitude for Aquinas:

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[591] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.25.1.
[592] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.4.1.
[593] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 194–95.
[594] Anna Mercedes, *Power For: Feminism and Christ's Self-Giving* (T & T Clark, 2011), 7.
[595] Davies, *Thomas Aquinas's Summa Theologiae*, 92.
[596] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.8.1.
[597] Cf. Catherine Keller, *Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming* (Routledge, 2003), 6; 49; 64.
[598] Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Blackwell Publishers, 2007), 68. Emphasis in original.

God brings creatures into being not out of any need for them, but because it is good that they exist.[599] This raises the possibility of rethinking divine self-sufficiency in terms of gift rather than possession or need.

God's unlimited being does not, by itself, address the concern that God is not impacted by creation. It only begins to address how omnipotence can be understood without implying domination. Yet one must begin with creation in order to address the question of relationship, because doing so clarifies that God does not create out of any need. Creation flows from the fullness of God's being, proceeding out of love and joy. Thus, creation is to be understood as a gift given freely by God. Understanding creation as gift requires further clarification because there is no single concept of the gift; rather, gift theory encompasses a broad range of approaches to voluntary giving and response. It has been observed that the concern with gifts being pure or without expectation is a modern preoccupation, when historically gift-giving has been conceived both as voluntary and requiring a response.[600] The question of response to divine gift-giving will be considered in the next section. At this point, however, it is necessary to point out that if creation is understood to be necessary, it suggests that God creates out of a need to fulfil his *telos*. John Barclay observes that in gift-giving, there are various ways in which it can be understood as a perfection. People have drawn on superabundance, incongruity, efficacy, non-circularity, singularity and priority.[601] By priority, Barclay is referring to the timing of the gift; the giver takes the initiative rather than reacting to a previous gift.[602] This understanding of gift-giving helps reevaluate aseity by framing divine self-sufficiency as the condition for gratuitous giving rather than as a means of retaining power. Its purpose is to emphasise that creation is not for God's benefit. God gives without self-interest; divine goodness consists not in acquiring what is lacking but in communicating the fullness of being. Transcendence secures the gratuity of the gift. To use the language of Paul Ricoeur, God operates on the level of superabundance rather than equivalence.[603] As Brian Robinette suggests, one should understand "divine gratuity as divine power".[604]

[599] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.19.1-2.
[600] Cf. John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2015), 55–57.
[601] Cf. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 69–75.
[602] Cf. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 71–72.
[603] Cf. Paul Ricoeur, 'Love and Justice', trans. David Pellauer, *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 21, no. 5/6 (1995): 34–36.
[604] Brian D. Robinette, *The Difference Nothing Makes: Creation, Christ, Contemplation* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2024), 27.

The final implication concerns what this implies about the value of creation itself. To be a part of creation, for Aquinas, means that one is a recipient of God's mercy. This mercy means that one's existence is not something that one deserves, which as Andrew Davison observes is the character of gift.[605] Aquinas writes that, "in every work of God, viewed at its primary source, there appears mercy. In all that follows, the power of mercy remains".[606] Existence itself is therefore gift. Denying that God needs creation does not imply that it is insignificant; rather it means that creation's value does not derive from utility or function. Human worth is often based on human action or intelligence, which has led to people with disabilities being treated as inferior. Disability has often been perceived as a burden or lacking dignity. Understanding creation as gift resists this economy of worth, because the value of the creature is indexed to being, not performance. Robinette writes that, "Coming to be 'from nothing' means 'coming to be for no reason'-no reason other than that it is *good* to be."[607] There are no expectations or preconditions for humanity's goodness. This is not simply about present valuation; the eschatological impulse to cure disability also obscures the value of disabled people now. Focusing on creation as a gift affirms that existence is good as it is which prevents eschatological homogenising. This is not to mean that there is not a need for justice in the world; sinful structures still require change. The point is that from the perspective of God, the human person's existence is of value in and of itself. It complements the idea of shamelessness pursued in the previous chapter (§4.2.2.).

5.1.2. Respecting Human Agency

It is not enough to establish the intimacy of the relationship between God and creation and to understand God's power through the prism of gift; it is also necessary to clarify what this means for the human person. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has questioned the idea of the disinterested gift, arguing that this can be an act of power, with societies deluding themselves into thinking it is for their own good.[608] While it is essential to affirm God's omnibenevolence, one might question whether the focus on God's gift risks undervaluing the contributions and agency of humanity, presenting creation as the passive recipient of an active God. There is a risk of paternalism, due to the focus on God's gift and human dependency. Disabled people are a group that frequently experiences paternalism, often due to assumptions that they are unable

[605] Cf. Andrew Davison, *Participation in God: A Study in Christian Doctrine and Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 30.
[606] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.21.4.
[607] Robinette, *The Difference Nothing Makes*, 68.
[608] Cf. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 61.

to understand the situation, that their judgment cannot be trusted, and therefore require others to make decisions for them. Disability theology must be cognisant of this dynamic as a result and clarify not only how God gives, but how human beings give and act in return. Therefore, to begin, it is necessary to identify the risk of paternalism within accounts of divine gift-giving.

The risk of paternalism makes it necessary to briefly consider Sarah Coakley's approach to divine power and kenosis, alongside Anna Mercedes's critique. Although both authors' focus is gender, they highlight similar concerns about paternalism, vulnerability and agency. Coakley proposes a vision of "gentle omnipotence" that must be evaluated in light of these concerns. For Coakley, kenosis in Christ means "uniting human 'vulnerability' with authentic divine power".[609] Mercedes argues that Coakley's preservation of omnipotence compromises her emphasis on vulnerability. Coakley frames vulnerability, submission, and receptivity as human qualities disclosed in Christ, rather than as merely feminine attributes. Mercedes argues that Coakley does not sufficiently address the gender stereotypes: "she instead lumps all of humanity, in Christ, into a feminized state of submission beneath a traditionally masculinized deity".[610] For Mercedes, the recognition of vulnerability must be paired with a challenge to hierarchical domination.

This criticism matters for disability theology because models of divine giving risk confirming human passivity. If humanity is reliant on the gift of God, it undermines their agency. Disabled people are often portrayed as objects of pity or lacking agency and the danger is that divine gift-giving could confirm that humanity is just passive agents of divine action. Such a model risks reinstating the dichotomy between able-bodied divinity and disabled submission in humanity. Disability theology must therefore challenge binaries of power and incapacity and affirm the agency of people with disabilities.

One key difference between this thesis and Coakley's work is its account of kenosis. While both affirm that kenosis involves the Son assuming a vulnerable human nature, the focus of this work is not on submission or emptying oneself for God to fill. Later in this chapter, it will be discussed in more detail why there is a need to avoid the language of penetration, because it requires a space or a lack for another to fill. From a disability perspective, such an

[609] Sarah Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 18.
[610] Mercedes, *Power For*, 35.

approach assumes that a person must be filled by another to be whole, implicitly curing the person. Understanding God's power as gift-giving moves away from the idea that creation must empty itself for the divine and instead affirms shamelessly one's status as human and creature. This is not a rejection of vulnerability or interdependence, but rather a clear affirmation of the goodness of creation. In this way, God's omnipotence corresponds with the idea that Christ is affirming human nature in taking it on. This does not treat human nature as perfected; it simply affirms that it is good to exist. The shamelessness explored in the previous chapter resists framing humanity as simply submissive to a higher power and instead encourages an embrace of one's vulnerability and nature. Yet affirming the goodness of vulnerable creaturely existence still leaves unresolved how divine and human action relate. Aquinas offers a metaphysical approach to this question through his account of double agency, in which divine causality empowers rather than replaces human action.

Aquinas denies any contradiction between human free will and God's will. His account of double agency holds that both God and the human person are causes. God is the First Agent or primary cause; humanity and the rest of creation are secondary causes.[611] God's agency does not end with the beginning of the world; Aquinas treats creation as the ongoing giving of *esse.* The two agents or causes do not conflict with each other, nor does God's agency make humanity irrelevant. As primary cause, God does not force specific human actions; he enables them to exist and act according to their nature. Because God grants creation its own "active power," divine and human agency operate on different levels.[612] It avoids the suggestion that God must limit himself for humanity to be free, a view that implies opposition between God and the world. David Fergusson observes that for Aquinas, "God does not so much act upon human persons, so causing them to behave in the ways they do, but instead makes them what they are, thus enabling them to be free."[613] Aquinas shows how divine causality at the level of origin and action preserves human agency. This establishes Aquinas's basic account of double agency as the foundation for understanding divine-human causality.

One of the reasons God and creation are interpreted as being in conflict is the assumption that "there is only one brand of causality."[614] Assuming a single kind of causality

[611] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.105.5.
[612] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.105.5.
[613] David Fergusson, *The Providence of God: A Polyphonic Approach* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 66.
[614] Michael Dodds, 'Unlocking Divine Action: Aquinas, Contemporary Science, and Divine Action', *Angelicum* 86 (2009): 76.

limits how God and the world can relate. It implies an incompatibility between divine and human action, so that the language of instrumentality risks portraying God as using the person and thereby rendering them passive. However, Aquinas distinguishes between four kinds of divine causality: he gives creatures the power to act; sustains their capacity to act; moves created agents; and wills all creation.[615] By distinguishing between different kinds of causality, Aquinas helps to make clear that God does not threaten human agency. As Dodds argues "As the creative idea of an artist does not interfere with her work of art, but is rather its source, so God as the exemplar formal cause, does not interfere with the world of creatures but is its source."[616] The formal cause gives a thing its nature, and therefore, its actions flow from that nature. Thus, divine causality establishes the conditions for agency rather than replacing it. Double agency affirms human beings and creation as genuine secondary causes, rather than existing in "a regime of endlessly repeated miracles."[617] Nevertheless, Aquinas's claim that God moves created agents could still appear to threaten human agency. From a disability perspective, such a collapse of human agency would reinforce ableist assumptions: that those who rely on others cannot be considered fully persons because their actions are derivative. Therefore, the relationship between divine omnipotence and the human will requires further clarification.

The same underlying issue of agency appears in a different register, when considering God moving humanity towards their final end. As final cause, God orients creaturely actions towards their proper end. The final cause is not coercive, because God is understood to be the Good, and therefore, the source of good in any action. For Aquinas, the final cause inclines the will toward the good: God is the universal good that all desire. God moves the human person's will, and it is here that concerns about heteronomous determination of agency by divine causality emerge.[618] God risks being envisioned as simply pushing the human person towards ends, rendering the human person passive with respect to divine will. While grace will be examined later in relation to Christ's two natures, it is enough here to identify this challenge of determinism. God must be understood as aiding creation, not overriding it, to ensure that receiving help is not feared or vilified. Thus, help must be understood in a way that safeguards the integrity of the human person.

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[615] Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 3.66-67; cf. Fergusson, *The Providence of God*, 71; cf. Ignacio Silva, 'Thomas Aquinas Holds Fast: Objections to Aquinas within Today's Debate on Divine Action', *The Heythrop Journal* LIV (2013): 662–63.
[616] Dodds, 'Unlocking Divine Action', 82.
[617] Fergus Kerr, *After Aquinas: Versions of Thomism* (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 45.
[618] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.105.5.

Aquinas's position shows that God has given creation a particular nature that is both free and with limitations, but the underlying concern persists across these accounts: how to avoid any suggestion of heteronomous determination. Part of the difficulty is Aquinas's insistence on the oneness of divine action. The singularity of God means that in one action, God creates, sustains, and saves. Everything moves toward the "good of the whole," and God permits evil "as the defect in one thing yields to the good of another."[619] There are reasons to keep God's power as singular: it attests to divine unity, constancy, and the coherence of divine purpose. However, the appeal to a single divine action risks obscuring certain theological truths. As established in Chapter Four, the desire for universal perfection tends to enact curative pressure; in the context of divine omnipotence, this pressure is reconfigured as power that resolves creaturely limitation rather than honouring it. The good of the whole risks undermining the goodness of the present, the gift of creation. When disability is framed as a privation of a good, the restoration and the perfecting of ability easily become the perceived *telos* of divine action. Aquinas safeguards agency metaphysically, yet the singularity of divine action risks introducing eschatological pressure and curative narratives. Following Kelsey, divine action can be conceived as operating across distinct registers rather than pursuing a single undifferentiated purpose.[620] These registers may complement each other, yet must be distinguished conceptually if one is to prevent the eschatological register from erasing the goodness of present creaturely existence. Differentiation is required, not to divide God, but to clarify what the language of divine singularity can obscure. Distinguishing different registers of divine action allows one to preserve both divine unity and creaturely integrity without collapsing all divine action into a single curative logic.

Differentiating between God's power to create, to sustain, and to save, shows that God respects the integrity of creation. To return to *creatio ex nihilo*, as previously noted, the concern that it is an act of domination rests on a mistake about what domination requires, because to create from nothing means there is nothing to dominate nor any rival agency to impose. It is creation in the truest sense, since it is out of nothing. Imposition or domination becomes a threat when another exists for God to interact with. It is *creatio continua* where God's power could be misread as forcing the creature into conformity. For Aquinas, creation is not a past event but the continual giving of being; God remains involved which means that creation does not lapse into

[619] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.22.2.
[620] Cf. David Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God's Power* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 180–81.

independence from its source.[621] To will into being is also to sustain its being. Separating the power to create out of nothing and the power to sustain clarifies that the sense of absolute power of creation is not operative in caring for humanity.

In differentiating between the two powers or registers, it is not to suggest that God's power has been diminished, as if he were to use less than full power. Aquinas holds that divine act is a single divine act, although there is a plurality of effects from it.[622] Differentiating the registers recognises that creaturely being is not God and that God respects their being and their freedom. Divine action honours creaturely agency rather than overriding it. It becomes necessary to consider what omnipotence means in this context where human integrity and agency are at stake. Kelsey describes God's providence in this register as being "constrained by the nature and conditions the creatures to which God is relating… God's providential care is shaped by faithfulness to the ontological integrity and particularity of already existing creatures."[623] This might be regarded as a limitation, that God is not going to radically alter what it means to be human. But this does not mean that God is not omnipotent, unless one seeks to adopt the position that God could create a four-sided triangle to be truly omnipotent. Aquinas is explicit that omnipotence does not include contradiction, because this would violate the order that God has established.[624] This is not a limitation of power, since privation would only apply if there were some perfections that God failed to realise. As previously mentioned, Aquinas thought of God as the formal cause, which meant that God is the source of one's nature; therefore, divine power respects the integrity of creation.

There is reason for hesitancy because this does have the potential to essentialise humanity and the rest of creation, thereby making nature a static concept. How to address the problem of essentialism will be in a later section, but at this point, it is important to note a few things. In understanding God as working within and through the structures of the world, it means that God can be the source of evolution without being the scientific explanation. God has created a world that is subject to change and therefore, in evolving, it is not contrary to the nature that God has given creation. There is a need to accept a degree of blurriness between natures in order to do justice to evolution. While evolution is not the focus of this work, the

[621] Cf. Davison, *Participation in God*, 27.
[622] Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1.45.6.
[623] Kelsey, *Human Anguish and God's Power*, 107.
[624] Cf. Aquinas, *SCG*, 2.15.2; 2.25.14.

inability to define nature is not a problem, because as will be argued later, the concept of human personhood is not to be particularly prescriptive.

Separating out the different aspects of divine power allows one to speak of the goodness of existing presently. When the primary focus is on what will happen in the future the present's value can be obscured. This is not a denial of the real problems and difficulties that exist today. One does not have to prove one's worth. Recognising creaturely integrity is essential because God's power to sustain is not about fulfilling a lack in humanity's being. While humanity is dependent on God, who is the ultimate cause of humanity's existence, this is different from saying that God is making up for a deficiency. This will be considered further when looking at the image of the mobility aid, but existing as an individual with particular limits and vulnerabilities is not contrary to human integrity. It is not simply that at the end one will have become a person with dignity; dignity is given with the gift of existence.

The idea that divine power should be understood through the lens of gift means that there is a line that cannot be crossed even by God. Any exercise of divine power that overrides or coerces the person would contradict God's role as creator, because the gift was freely given. This is why the priority of God's gift is crucial because it underlines how it is not for God's benefit. This not only helps to make clear the innate nature of the gift, but it also limits the expectations placed on the recipient. In the case of creation, because it is both gift and recipient, both the gratuity of divine giving and the voluntariness of creaturely response must be preserved. To be a gift means one cannot be a possession. God allows humanity to be a free Other that develops, and therefore, to suggest that divine power compromises that freedom is not only to have an expectation but to move to the realm of force. However, it is one thing to affirm humanity as a gift as a boundary God will not cross; it remains necessary to consider whether this affirmation risks making human action superfluous to God.

Approaching divine power in this way not only recognises that God is not an imposition on the human person but also stresses the integrity of the human person through the gift-giving paradigm. Yet this does not fully resolve the question of how to understand human agency in relation to God. Human agency might seem irrelevant if human action does not affect God. The question arises whether, if God is not impacted by a return gift, humanity's response risks becoming insignificant. Humanity would seem to be the only real recipient. Mercedes criticises reliance on divine power because it risks making humanity passive. There is a concern that if

humanity is viewed as passive agents, it continues the narrative that they are simply recipients of care. As mentioned in the literature review (pp.36-38), Powell argues for an understanding of God that is receptive to humanity and needs humanity for his identity. She draws on the work of Eva Feder Kittay, who argues that there is agency in being the recipient of care, rather than solely on the side of the caregiver. Accounts of care often ignore that the recipient of care must receive and accept the care offered by the other person. Kittay observes how her daughter, who may appear passive, nonetheless "There are times when she makes it difficult for us to give her medication, when she turns away at something unpleasant we have to do, and there are other times when she clearly helps us to help her."[625]

Powell identifies it as key that Kittay emphasises reciprocity and mutuality without requiring that each party gives equally, acknowledging that the mutuality need not be symmetrical, a point that challenges the assumption some disabled people cannot have meaningful relationships. While the relationship might not be equal, this does not imply that the person who is dependent on others is incapable of contributing. From this, Powell argues that the asymmetrical relationship between God and humanity recognises that God receives as well as gives. He is interdependent.[626] This view of care aligns with Powell's covenant theology, where God is reliant on creation for the constitution of his triune being. Powell's account departs from classical theism, because it treats divine identity as dependent on covenantal history. Creation becomes necessary for God to be who he has determined himself to be, securing divine receptivity and genuine reciprocity.[627] While her argument is attractive for disability theology because it emphasises interdependence, the question remains whether it sufficiently addresses the ableist narratives this thesis has identified.

Powell is right to highlight the agency of people with disabilities and, in doing so, makes space for humanity, including people with disabilities, to offer a return gift. But the challenge is to what extent one wishes to place value on action. Disability has historically been entangled with norms of efficiency, reliability, and productivity, and so it exposes how value becomes tied to performance. Powell is critical of the view that one's contribution to a relationship must be a symmetrical exchange.[628] For those reliant on the care, insisting on equal exchange places their worth in question. What appears as passivity in disability is not the

[625] Eva Feder Kittay, *Learning from My Daughter: The Value and Care of Disabled Minds* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 186.
[626] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 111–13.
[627] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 53.
[628] Cf. Powell, *The Disabled God Revisited*, 112.

absence of agency but a different mode of it: the acceptance, shaping, and inhabiting of care. Powell's use of Kittay's work identifies this receptive agency as theologically significant, particularly for humanity's relationship with God. The retention of the asymmetrical relationship means that God is still understood to be God rather than a part of creation. Humanity can contribute to God, without implying equality with God. But the reason to maintain the idea of God's self-sufficiency is not because being helped means that one lacks dignity, but because it places the emphasis on God giving to creation. An important aspect of this understanding of gift-giving is that humanity has a dignity and worth without any reference to what one does. Actions do not need to have a clear impact on others to be meaningful.

One of the challenges with this idea of gift-giving and the recognition that it is good to be is whether it is speaking down to people with disabilities. It could be understood to be infantilising, saying that one could not achieve anything and therefore, there is no point in having expectations that cannot be fulfilled. In saying that one's existence is good, it is not a participation prize. The point is to avoid objectification of the human person. One's presence is a gift and matters to God, even though God does not need them. Powell's approach ensures that humanity cannot be viewed as irrelevant, God needs humanity just as humanity needs him. However, in understanding God as giving purely for the benefit of creation, it resists the suggestion that creation is a tool. As Olivers observes gifts are not simply about usefulness or economic value, but they bear meaning.[629] Creation can be full of meaning even if it does not contribute to his being.

Given the concern of objectification, the logical move would appear to be to follow an understanding of gift that is disinterested and without obligation, as articulated by Jacques Derrida. Under this paradigm, the gift becomes non-circular and therefore rules out contractual obligation and an emphasis on reciprocal action. Derrida's account initially appears attractive for disability theology because it seeks to prevent the recipient from being reduced to an object within an economy of exchange or usefulness. However, Derrida's account also rules out the possibility of a meaningful response. All one can hope to be is a passive recipient. Furthermore, Derrida suggests that gratitude for a gift negates its ability to be a gift and questions whether the giver can knowingly give a gift and be disinterested. For Derrida, a pure gift is impossible. As John Milbank describes Derrida's position, "A true gift would be from no-one, to no-one and of

[629] Cf. Simon Oliver, *Creation: A Guide for the Perplexed* (Bloomsbury, 2017), 144.

nothing."[630] From a Christian perspective, there are several reasons why Derrida's position does not work, but what is particularly important is that God is not understood to be driven by self-interest.[631] The transcendence of God helps to highlight that he does not struggle with being swayed by self-interest. The aseity of God ensures that he is not creating out of anything other than love for his creation.

The idea that God gives completely for the benefit of the human person does not rule out the possibility of the return of a gift. But part of the challenge is the nature of the gift-giving in the divine context which does not correspond with how humans give gifts. Milbank writes that, "a return is inevitably made, for since the creature's very being resides in its reception of itself as a gift, the gift is, in itself, the gift of return-in the specifically human instance, of 'such a heart whose pulse may be Thy praise'."[632] The gift that God is giving is life itself. The recipient cannot refuse the gift without refusing themself. In Derrida's framework, this would mean that it cannot be regarded as a true gift, rather it is closer to an imposition.

As argued in Chapter Four (pp.165-169), there is a need for a sense of shamelessness to counter the narratives that undermine one's worth. There are those who struggle to see themselves as a gift. Gratitude for one's life can seem like an imposition because in difficult circumstances, it can seem impossible to ask for gratitude. However, gratitude means accepting the gift of one's life and the lives of others. As Milbank argues, there is the possibility for a reciprocal gift through the life that one lives. To give back to God involves the acceptance of the gift which must be worked out by the individual. But the gift of life is not contingent on fulfilling one's *telos*. There is the possibility of a response to the gift; one must understand that the gift is given out of complete gratuity and therefore, the gift that is returned must also be given out of gratuity. An exchange is possible, but the unilateral nature of God's love is paramount. Before and regardless of what the human person does, they are a gift. There is a beauty in simply being. A gift is no less a gift even if it is not received as such. But there are risks with placing too much emphasis on the relationships as the basis of one's personhood, which will be explored in the next section.

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[630] John Milbank, 'Can a Gift Be Given? Prolegomena to a Future Trinitarian Metaphysic', *Modern Theology* 11, no. 1 (1995): 130.
[631] At the most basic level, Derrida's approach would prevent God from wanting to be known and in relationship with the world as it would put in question the purity of the gift, which is directly in opposition with the Christian understanding of God. It would mean that the incarnation cannot be regarded as a gift, because in the act of revealing that Christ is divine, one is alerted to the giver.
[632] Milbank, 'Can a Gift Be Given?', 135.

Understanding the human person primarily as God's gift is not a platitude; rather, it underpins three key theological claims that bring the preceding argument into focus. Firstly, it creates a boundary that no one, but in particular God, can cross. God's relationship with the gift means the human person is accepted as they are. However, it does not mean there is no ability for God to aid humanity, rather the point is that it cannot be in such a way that suggests a complete refiguration of the gift. It does not change the basic gift; God's providence only aids the gift already given. This does not suggest that there is a deficit in the human person that must be filled. God's providence is about furthering the gift, and it cannot be about reclaiming what has been given and completely changing its ontology. Therefore, it must be understood as supportive, rather than controlling.

The second related claim is that in being created, one is understood as a gift, and this frees the human person from expectations and conditions placed on their existence. One's life is a gift and has value, prior to any action. There cannot be expectations that suggest a contractual relationship, nor the demand that one's life display gratitude; yet God delights in one's presence and existence alone. Humanity is not created out of any need by God, but out of pure gift.

The third claim is that understanding creation as a gift means one is dependent on God as well as experiencing limitations. It is he who is the source of creation, but these limits are different from a deficit. Deficiency suggests both a failing and a shortage. The dependency that comes with the gift of life might be seen as unavoidable and therefore, not a failing, but it goes deeper: lifelong dependency and limitation does not negate the gift. Genesis 1 repeatedly declares that God looked at creation and declared it was good. Dependency and limitations are part of the gift and endure throughout life. The human person needs support, and this is not about fulfilling a lack, because this would imply that there are humans that do not experience dependency or limitation. It is the reality of being a creature to be needy.

5.1.3. Human Personhood and Relationships

Before turning to Christ, there is a need to consider how relationships, both with God and other people, impact the concept of human personhood. This section begins by considering how to think about the relationships between humans before turning to God's relationship with

humanity and therefore, returns to the question of personhood that was briefly explored in Chapter Two. Having argued against the idea that God is constituted by creation, the issue becomes what the role relations play in constituting human personhood. Disability theology gives particular force to this question because disability exposes human dependency and challenges accounts based on rational autonomy and independence. For this reason, relational ontology appears attractive for disability theology because it defines personhood through relation instead. But the question emerges of whether personhood becomes contingent upon the capacity to sustain relationships.

The word person comes from the Latin term for social, legal, and theatrical roles, suggesting that the person is defined by the role they play in the world.[633] Personhood appears to have an inherently social dimension. John Zizioulas argues that personhood does not refer to human traits, but to being open to and moving toward communion.[634] *Prima facie*, this appears a promising direction for human anthropology because it turns attention away from rationality as the basis of human personhood, thereby avoiding the exclusion of people with disabilities. Relationality is also closely related to human dependency: humans need relations to live, showing the myth of independence. As a result, many disability theologians regard relational ontology as promising.[635]

While relationality avoids focusing on intellectual or autonomous capacities, which can be harmful for disabled people, it risks replacing one set of abilities with another. The relational turn suggests that one needs other people in order to define oneself. For example, Zizioulas argues that "If we isolate the "I" from the "thou" we lose not only its otherness but also its very being."[636] The issue is that in this framework being is constituted through interpersonal interaction. One of Harriet Harris' concerns is that if relations are what define human beings,

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[633] Cf. Ian McFarland, 'Personhood and the Problem of the Other', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 54, no. 2 (2001): 204.
[634] Cf. John D. Zizioulas, 'Human Capacity and Human Incapacity: A Theological Exploration of Personhood', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 28, no. 5 (1975): 407–8.
[635] The relational aspect is a core aspect of many disability theologies. It is a key aspect of L'Arche communities which Frances Young observes took seriously how people with disabilities are often lacking relationships and stressed the importance of mutual relationships, not simply what the disabled person needs. Cf. Frances Young, *Arthur's Call: A Journey of Faith in the Face of Severe Learning Disability* (SPCK, 2014), 94. Relationships continues to be seen as an important, even when L'Arche communities do not have as much influence in contemporary disability theology. Cf. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship*; cf. Thomas E. Reynolds, 'Toward a Theology of Care and Disability: Some Preliminary Considerations', *Journal of Religion and Theology* 5, no. 1 (2023): 15–22; cf. Tataryn and Truchan-Tataryn, *Discovering Trinity in Disability*, 27–28.
[636] Zizioulas, Communion and Otherness, p. 9

personhood risks becoming a matter of degree, contingent on relational quality.[637] This risk has the potential to further marginalise people with disabilities because they are often seen as unable to have rich relationships. Leidenhag argues that in viewing social relations as constitutive of personhood, the result is that the norms associated with personhood are difficult for autistic people to meet because of their challenges with social interactions, a problem that extends to others whose communicative capacities are perceived as limited.[638]

Throughout this thesis, it has been observed how Moltmann's theology places an emphasis on relationships. In viewing personhood as something one becomes, which is only intelligible in relation to the whole, Moltmann avoids treating human nature statically and instead incorporates the history and relationships of the individual. From a disability perspective, the challenge is in affirming personhood without placing undue weight on relational performance, while still recognising people's capacity to act. There is a question of whether one wants to stress the givenness of the human person or their actions. As argued in the previous section, focusing on the priority of divine gift is not to say that human actions are irrelevant to God, but to stress their inherent worth apart from productivity or utility. This tension between the givenness of the person and the significance of human action also appears within Moltmann's relational account of personhood. What is notable in his framework is that this does not make some actions more valuable than others, because as mentioned in Chapter Two (pp.67-69), Moltmann includes the entire life as being part of one's identity. No stage is to be viewed as preliminary and therefore, there is a need to accept and identify with oneself, even when one's agency is not apparent. This valuing of what might seem to be small actions extends to his account of relationships. He does not over intellectualise friendship, making it an attitude and therefore, it is discovered rather than made. It can be found "in the smile of a passer-by, in the play of the wind, or the rushing of a brook."[639] In making the basis of friendship appreciation, he suggests it does not require complicated thought. It is also noteworthy that this approach does not require reciprocal relationships, since elsewhere his theology emphasises being affected by others, particularly in relation to God and the world.

Yet the emphasis on being constituted through relationships raises a deeper concern: what becomes of personhood when meaningful interaction is absent? While what constitutes

[637] Cf. Harriet A. Harris, 'Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?', *Scottish Journal of Theology* 51, no. 2 (1998): 232.
[638] Cf. Leidenhag, 'The Challenge of Autism', 132.
[639] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 255.

relation is part of the problem for a relational personhood from the perspective of disability, Moltmann shows that there is the possibility for a more general idea of relating to others. The challenge is explaining how these small actions are worthwhile while also affirming that people with disabilities deserve more than passing attention. The consequences for a lack of relation, according to Moltmann, are dire. He writes that, "Total lack of relationship is total death."[640] While this statement is true because it speaks to human interdependence, the difficulty is how it relates to one's personhood. It suggests that there are those who can be regarded as non-persons. Harris expresses the concern that the absence of meaningful relationships could create a non-person, like an ancient Greek slave.[641] For Moltmann, the existence of non-persons is not necessarily a problem because it does not mean that they are not human. As discussed in Chapter Three (pp.94-95), in his description of Christ as a non-person, it is because of the treatment by others. It means that one has been denied one's rights and dignity, treated as an object. The designation of being a non-human is a result of sin. At the same time, because Moltmann sees all of one's life as bound up with one's personhood, he does not sufficiently differentiate between experience and personhood. Eventually, it will all be seen part of the whole.

As discussed in Chapter Two (pp.67-69), Moltmann understands personhood as a process, emphasising the importance of human history. Yet what is the human person beyond their history and their relations? Moltmann does not support the idea that there is no self. He argues that as well as a problem of "the self-separated, self-mastering individual," there is another extreme, where the individual is lost.[642] Joy Ann McDougall points out that for Moltmann, as a social Trinitarian, to identify an individual only with their relations would be a kind of modalism, and just like persons of the Trinity, the human person "cannot be reduced to communal modes of being".[643] One's personhood and community develop at the same time, according to Moltmann.[644] The issue is that Moltmann offers no account of the human person apart from their relations. He says that "The isolated individual and the solitary subject are *deficient modes of being human* because they fall short of likeness to God."[645] This likeness is the expectation that one will be perichoretic, penetrating each other's being, following the example of the Trinity, who are understood to dwell in one another in love and produce a

[640] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 219.
[641] Cf. Harris, 'Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?', 232.
[642] Moltmann, *The Spirit of Life*, 251.
[643] Joy Ann McDougall, *Pilgrimage of Love: Moltmann on the Trinity and Christian Life* (Oxford University Press, 2005), 186–87 ft. 61.
[644] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 223.
[645] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 223. Emphasis added.

perfect empathy for each other.[646] Once again, one needs other people to become human in order to avoid being a deficient person. Some people seem to have holes or wounds that are open and waiting to be filled. They are like Christ waiting on the cross, feeling the absence of the Father's relationship. The understanding of the image of God being pursued by Moltmann is relationally developed through one's relationships rather than bestowing inherent dignity on the human person. As a result, difficulties remain for disabled people who may be seen as deficient in their ability to be like God. This exposes a structural vulnerability in relational ontology: personhood becomes difficult to secure when relational breakdown is treated as ontological breakdown. An adequate account must therefore avoid grounding personhood in relations that remain vulnerable to withdrawal or collapse.

The key question, then, is what kind of relation can ground the person without collapsing under social failure or exclusion. Existing in a sinful world means that harmful relations define persons. Human relational networks can therefore exclude, creating non-persons or people whose personhood appears underdeveloped. Rather than abandoning relational ontology, one must locate personhood in a relation that is not dependent on human reciprocity or competence, namely, the relationship between God and humanity. At this point, the work of John Swinton becomes instructive. He recognises the centrality of God's relationship with humanity precisely because human relationships lack stability. He writes that, "If personhood has to do with only our temporal and mundane relationships, then what we are as persons will inevitably become unravelled as our relational networks break down. Like layers of an onion, our personhood will be peeled away as the various relationships in our lives are stripped from us by malignant social psychology, disease processes, and/or the death of our friends."[647] Swinton is writing in the context of dementia, although other disabilities result in the loss of relationships.

The turn towards one's relationship with God means a relationship that cannot disintegrate. As Isaiah 49:15 says, even when close relationships that seem unwavering end, God will remain. The result is a basis for relational personhood that is not subject to change or destruction. Another aspect is that the presence and relationship of God bestows dignity on people with dementia and other severe cognitive disabilities, and therefore, obliges Christians to be committed to them. As Swinton argues, this means that while non-Christians may not

[646] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 175.
[647] John Swinton, *Dementia: Living in the Memories of God* (William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2012), 149.

understand themselves to have obligations towards people with dementia, Christians are to attempt to be like God and be in relationship with them.[648] They are to be recognised as persons because God does. There is a protection that comes from the relationship: even if the world does not recognise one's personhood, God does. This recognition carries the moral imperative to recognise the personhood of all of humanity.

While Moltmann and Swinton both emphasise relationship, Swinton makes clear that even when humans fail, God does not. The human person always remains in relationship with God, which Moltmann does not adequately secure. Moltmann's assertion that "total lack of relationship is total death" sits uneasily with the claim that one is always in relationship with God, regardless of social abandonment. This tension arises from Moltmann's dialectical theology, particularly his theology of the cross, where divine presence and absence are held together. As argued in Chapter Four (pp.139-141), Moltmann portrays the crucifixion as a trinitarian drama in which the Son experiences abandonment by the Father. The difficulty is that Moltmann does not distinguish between Christ's perception of what is happening to him and what is happening in the Trinity. This is not only important for Christ, but for all of humanity who seek God's faithfulness. The Spirit provides comfort, but, at the same time, the promises of God's faithfulness have not yet been fulfilled. For Moltmann, it is only at the end that one will know who God is.[649] Until the eschaton, this approach allows for the questions of suffering to remain open and avoids the risk of providing answers that attempt to silence people's pain, but one is still waiting for the counternarrative to begin.

Both absence and presence are not only part of Moltmann's theology of the cross but also a key part of his doctrine of creation. Godforsakenness is not only attributed to Christ's experience of the cross but also exists through the act of creation. God did not only make space, but also had to be absent in creation in order to allow it to be a truly free Other.[650] He develops the idea of *zimzum* to argue that in order to create something that is not God, he needs to "withdraw".[651] God had to contract himself so that the world could be free, creating a space understood as both in God and out of God.[652] *Nihil* comes from the withdrawal of God and is prior to creation. He describes this space as "set free by God's self-limitation [which] is a

[648] Cf. Swinton, *Dementia*, 149–51.
[649] Cf. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (SCM Press, 2002), 104.
[650] Cf. Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 86.
[651] Jürgen Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Fortress Press, 2003), 119.
[652] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 109.

literally God-forsaken place. The *nihil* in which God creates his creation is God-forsakenness, hell, absolute death; and it is against the threat of this that he maintains his creation in life."[653] The *nihil* only becomes "menacing" through humanity's self-isolation.[654] This allows Moltmann to absolve God of responsibility for *nihil's* danger. The nothingness opened by God's withdrawal does not only threaten creation, but also God himself.

The difficulty with Moltmann's approach is not that he allows space for the human person to be an Other, but that he relies on spatial imagery of withdrawal which is repeatedly coupled with privation and wretchedness. This combination suggests that created difference is already marked by lack. It assumes that there is a problem with God creating humanity and human freedom. There cannot be the unity between God and creation prior to the eschaton, which is not in itself problematic given the belief that one will see God face to face (1 Cor. 13:12), yet Moltmann does not sufficiently articulate the goodness of creation *from the beginning.* While he holds God's love and absence in tension, his description of hell in *nihil* prior to creation means that there is a sense of the Fall before humans even exist. As J. Matthew Bonzo observes in Moltmann's theology, "The very existence of creation as creation is already a demerit, an absence, a distance from God, a distance that "needs" redemption. The original separation from God — without any human intent or misdeed - is already conceived as an oppositional "movement against God."[655] The separation is to uphold integrity, yet it does not present separation as positive. The relational ontology in which one can only know both God and creation at the eschaton obscures the goodness of creation now. It is difficult to speak of the gift of what has been given when Moltmann in his rejection of natural theology insists that neither humanity nor God are to be identified with the world as it is. Moltmann wants to challenge the status quo. He does understand the new creation as being related to what went before but this needs greater articulation to retain the goodness. Ideas such as the purposelessness of creation are there but remain disconnected to his ideas on eschatology and cosmology. This is needed to undercut the dialectic. This thesis has been cautious about too strong an eschatological orientation, instead focusing on the goodness of creation now, which is important for disability theology because it affirms existence in the present without constant deferral to the future.

[653] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 87–88.
[654] Moltmann, *God in Creation*, 88.
[655] J. Matthew Bonzo, *Indwelling the Forsaken Other: The Trinitarian Ethics of Jürgen Moltmann* (Pickwick Publications, 2009), 115.

One of the important aspects of Swinton's social ontology is that he makes clear that humans are not just their relations. He writes that, "Persons exist independently of their relations. They are to be valued, loved, and cared for as persons because they are human beings."[656] The relational approach if brought to an extreme can in the words of Zizioulas mean that "Nothing exists as an 'individual,' conceivable in itself."[657] Moltmann's position is not as extreme as Zizioulas's stance, as Moltmann understands personhood as being developed alongside one's community. He acknowledges distinctness, yet it remains difficult to speak of the person apart from their relations. Moltmann understands human history and context as having an important role in theology. This is clearest in his criticisms of classical theism, where divine impassibility is argued to suggest that the history of the world does not matter.[658] But the difficulty with a relational approach is that it is necessary to understand the human person beyond their context or relations to some degree. Agency allows for the person to be seen as more than simply the processes that happen to them. It means that while one has limits, one has the freedom to act and respond. However, agency alone is insufficient. There is also a need for a separation between the person and their actions. Actions and history are important aspects of who someone is, but they cannot be the basis of worth. There is a need to focus on how prior to any action or relation the human person is to be understood as a gift. This requires at least some degree of an ontology that does not focus on other beings. This does not imply a pre-existent, fully formed self. It is to emphasise that they are not simply their relationships and a result of the processes. They happen to *someone*. As Harris argues "Persons are ontologically prior to relations."[659] Being able to differentiate someone from their social context helps to ensure that they are not seen as simply a product of those relations.

In arguing that people exist prior to their actions, there is a risk of implying that humanity could transcend their circumstances. There is no suggestion that one can understand the human person completely abstracted from the webs of relation and context, this would require a knowledge that is impossible. The claim being advanced is modest: that there is something that one can name as human personhood. Human persons are prior to anything else fleshy, vulnerable, living creatures. There are many qualities that are characteristic of humanity, such as physical attributes and capabilities, but they are not essential. This is not important

[656] Swinton, *Dementia*, 259.
[657] John D. Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 1985), 18.
[658] Cf. Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 22.
[659] Harris, 'Should We Say That Personhood Is Relational?', 232.

simply from the perspective of disability but also because humans grow and change, gaining and losing characteristics.

Robert Spaemann's approach to the idea of personhood is useful in this regard. He writes:

> 'Person' is not a classifier, but points to an *individuum vagum,* the unicity of an individual life. 'Person', therefore, is an analogical concept, like 'being'. Persons are called persons in the same way that members of a family bear the same family name. The name means something different for each member of the family… It is not a general concept that embraces them all regardless of their distinctive differences. The family name assigns a particular place in the family structure to each one who bears it. In the community of persons, similarly, each person has a place forever uniquely defined as his or hers.[660]

Describing personhood as analogous to a family name helps ensure that everyone is included, regardless of their physical and mental capacities. It avoids essentialisms that come with definitions of personhood that rely on capacities. It does not place one person over another, as if making one an ideal that everyone else ought to live up to. Furthermore, it allows for individuality. Spaemann's approach helps counter a purely relational ontology by grounding personhood in something more fundamental than social interaction. It is the fact of being human that makes one a person. It is one's bodily constitution in the broadest sense, that one is biologically human because one is born to human parents. This means that one is a person prior to anything.

It is not a complete rejection of relational ontology. For example, Martina Holder-Franz writes that, "A relational perspective on the human person means that they are not defined by ability, but rather *their availability* for relationships."[661] This idea of availability implies that one is not simply their relationships, existence comes first. In existing as a creature, one continually gives presence. This presence can result in relationships and solidarity. But in the act of living, one gives the gift of presence before anything else. One's existence is already valued by God.

One reason that a relational approach is preferred is to ensure that the human person is not an object. It does not imagine an encounter between a subject and an object, but between

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[660] Robert Spaemann, *Persons: The Difference between 'Someone' and 'Something'*, trans. Oliver O'Donovan (Oxford University Press, 2017), 68.
[661] Martina Holder-Franz, 'Life as Being in Relationship: Moving beyond a Deficiency-Orientated View of Human Life', in *Theology, Disability and the New Genetics: Why Science Needs the Church*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (T & T Clark, 2007), 61. Emphasis added.

two subjects. This is particularly important for disabled people who are often reduced to their diagnosis and symptoms. As discussed in the Introduction (pp.7–8), while experiences of disability are diverse, many disabled people understand disability as an integral part of who they are, such that it cannot be separated from the individual. However, this is not everyone's experience, particularly those who are not disabled from birth. Yet regardless of this difference, both groups can be objectified. Drawing on Martin Buber's differentiation between I-Thou and I-It relationships, Swinton describes the latter as meaning that "To address the Other as an "It" requires coolness, conceptualization, detachment, and instrumentality. "I-It" relationships are analytical and conceptual; those in them are inclined to judge people and things according to their functions."[662] There is a loss of meeting the person, reducing them to diagnoses and capacities. While at times it can be necessary, it fails to meet the other person.

The relational approach is seen to rectify the essentialism of a substance ontology because it focuses on the person without claiming absolute knowledge beforehand. But this movement away from relational ontology is not to be understood as a return to objectification. There are basic qualities recurrent in human beings that can be taken as human nature. But the language of both personhood and gift is important because it ensures that one is not treated as an object. Human personhood is biological but that is not where one should focus attention; its role is simply to ensure universality rather than exclusion. Personhood in the context of ethics is about recognition, and it means that one can expect a certain treatment from others.[663] The relational idea of personhood enables one to move away from a static, self-contained notion of the person while acknowledging the impact of others. There is no intention to suggest that the human person's identity is prior to relations with others, whether those relations are human or divine. It is in this sense that there is value in arguing that personhood only comes at the eschaton because one is not complete prior to this. However, this would be better understood as identity rather than personhood, as its role is simply to ensure universality rather than exclusion. Differentiating between identity and personhood makes clear that regardless of relationships and history one is worthy of dignity. What is argued as being central here is the existence of the human person, not what they are able to do.

[662] Swinton, *Dementia*, 141.
[663] Cf. Spaemann, *Persons*, 6.

5.2. A Non-Curative Divine Nature

5.2.1. Respecting the Integrity of Christ's Human Nature

The relationship between God and the world is important for Christology because many of the questions reflect the same concerns. For example, does divinity infringe on Christ's humanity? Or does his humanity require that his divinity be divested? Having argued that divine power and human limits are compatible rather than in conflict with each other, this has consequences for Christ's two natures. From a disability perspective, the relationship between the two natures must preserve the integrity of the human. The divinity of Christ cannot be understood to make up for any lack in Christ, otherwise, it would suggest that his humanity involves a deficit. Such an account would align Christ's humanity with a medical model, where his divinity cures him of his limitations. One of the issues that comes up is the question of otherness. Disability is often constructed as a form of otherness, and God is also described as radically other. As argued in this chapter, the purpose of human otherness is to ensure that it is not subsumed into God and to ensure that humanity is not instrumentalised by God. In the case of Christ, unlike the rest of humanity, the retention of boundaries could seem to be detrimental for understanding the reality of the incarnation, since it may appear to distance the divine from vulnerable human embodiment. Nevertheless, respecting this boundary is essential for affirming that Christ's humanity is real and not merely symbolic. This concern becomes especially acute in disability theology, because the value of Christ's humanity determines how vulnerability, limitation, and embodied dependency are interpreted. At this point, the communication of idioms becomes decisive, because Christology must articulate how divinity and humanity relate without curative intrusion. In many ways, the communication of idioms is about relating the specific and limited with what is beyond definition.

In Chapter Three (pp.92-93), it was described how Moltmann interprets the communication of idioms as meaning that Christ's two natures are not to be separated from each other as this would mean that the unity exists only intellectually rather than in their being. Moltmann's approach therefore results in an intimate interconnection between Christ's humanity and divinity. This view contrasts with Aquinas, who understands Christ's earthly life as an expression of the divine life, but not constitutive of it. For Moltmann, divinity is already vulnerable and therefore humanity can impact the divine. The difficulty is whether Moltmann leaves anything meaningfully distinct between the two natures, even though he does not explicitly collapse them into one. Yet in the incarnation Christ becomes the "human God", according to Moltmann, even though the attributes associated with creatureliness, such as passibility, are understood by Moltmann to already exist in God through the kenotic action of

creation. Areas where one would expect a difference, such as omniscience, are not maintained because Moltmann rejects classical omniscience in favour of relational knowing.[664] There is a risk that God differs from humanity in degree, rather than being completely other. Critiquing Moltmann for insufficiently distinguishing the natures is not a return to a binary model. Rather it is necessary to recognise that they are not the same. Otherwise, the magnitude of the Word taking on a nature that is not his own divinity is diminished.

Where this becomes most problematic is in Moltmann's account of Christ's personhood in the incarnation. For Moltmann, the main difference that comes with the incarnation is that the Son is now an embodied agent in history. He brings presence and solidarity. But in offering an account of both human personhood and divinity that barely differ from one another, it risks dissolving any ontological distinction between them. If something is true of Christ as human, Moltmann maintains that it must be true of him in his divinity. There are almost no boundaries between the human and divine in Moltmann's theology. There is a risk that Moltmann's focus on a relational approach to Christology means that he is open to everything and is constituted by his relationships, with the Trinity and those he spends time with. The danger is that one loses any sense of distinct natures at all; if everything is relationally constituted, there is no stable humanity or divinity to be impacted. The consequence of this position is that one loses any sense that they are meaningfully different. To be human, to be a creature is something different than what it means to be God, even when it comes to Christ. The difference appears to be a concentration of limits that comes with being embodied. The incarnation is about identification with humanity and the rest of creation. But with no engagement with a non-relational ontology, there is no sense of a humanity that is not in relation to anything else. If there is no discussion of an ontology that is not relational, it makes ontological integrity difficult to maintain. There is a need for something that is prior to the web of relation.

The issue is not simply the ambiguity between Christ's two natures in Moltmann's Christology, but that this ambiguity weakens the distinction between them. While Moltmann does not deny the two natures, it is necessary to say that Christ's humanity and divinity are distinct. As previously discussed, there are dangers in defining human nature, but it is required that there is at least an apophatic definition, that to be human is different to being God. The otherness is not to protect his divinity, but to affirm that he is fully human. The challenge with Moltmann's account of humanity shaping divinity is that it approaches a mixing of natures.

[664] Cf. Moltmann, *Science and Wisdom*, 64.

Particularly with the eschatological framing where personhood occurs at the end, it means that one is one's history and therefore, boundaries between Christ's humanity and divinity seem irrelevant. But this is compounded by the interpenetration implied by his account of communication of idioms, which suggests that there is a space in Christ that needs to be filled by others. Moltmann does not frame this space as deficiency, yet the logic of space making functions as if something is missing, requiring completion from outside. In coming together, each nature appears to fill what is lacking in the other, such that they become difficult to differentiate, but one loses the integrity of the human nature. One of the key concerns for a disability Christology is that Christ's humanity is taken seriously, and this requires ontological integrity. He is a limited, vulnerable, passible, and embodied human being. Therefore, there is a need to think how Christ's human nature is distinct from his divinity, while also stressing unity of his natures.

The need for distinction becomes particularly evident in Moltmann's treatment of kenosis. The idea that Christ's humanity has a dignity of its own is important for considering how a disability Christology treats kenosis. Kenosis is not to be regarded as a subtraction, but an addition to the Son. Kenosis for Moltmann is an important concept, yet it is notable that throughout his various works, he rarely writes about what kenosis means in relation to the Son specifically, rather than what it means for the Trinity. Part of the difficulty in claiming that Moltmann's understanding of kenosis is one of addition is because it makes it difficult to identify what is being added to the Son. When Moltmann writes about the kenosis of the Son, he is primarily focused on the cross and thus struggles to view kenosis as a positive addition. For example, he writes that, "*the kenosis of the Son to the point of death* is the 'revelation of the entire Trinity'".[665] Elsewhere, he states that "The kenosis is realized on the cross."[666] The cross is being portrayed as the high point of kenosis, which defines kenosis. The cross for Moltmann shows the Son as being abandoned by the Father. What this shows is that kenosis for Moltmann is primarily experienced as a subtraction of divine unity, in order to take on the negative experiences of humanity. If kenosis is to be regarded as a kind of disablement under Moltmann's approach, it would be to continue viewing disability as being tragic and involving a deficit. It is not simply about being vulnerable but entering into the tragic nature that creation experiences. While the absence is not forever, it does not provide a view of kenosis that underscores the dignity and value of vulnerable human flesh today, the focus is primarily on God also being subject to pain.

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[665] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 213. Emphasis added.
[666] Moltmann, *The Trinity and the Kingdom of God*, 119.

By contrast, a disability Christology requires an assumptive account of kenosis. Understanding kenosis as the assumption of human nature means that disability is not a deficit because vulnerability and limits are not contrary to human dignity. The assumptive approach helps to underscore that Christ's humanity is a gift. The solidarity offered by Moltmann centres on the experience of suffering on the cross, and this becomes the primary interpretive aim of the incarnation for Moltmann. It is crucial to give a voice to those who suffer and are marginalised. In the history of Christology, the primary interpretive lens for understanding Christ's life has been on the soteriological significance and there is a need to expand how one interprets the incarnation. Soteriology has the ability to limit one's focus and interpretation, narrowing the incarnation to the problem of sin. Rather than viewing sin as the primary reason for incarnation, there is a need to emphasise that Christ also shows that the body is not shameful. As discussed in the previous chapter (pp.165-169), by understanding Christ as being shameless in his embodiment with its limits and vulnerability, he is emphasising that human flesh, human bodies, and human existence are good. It is not something to escape. While the focus on sin is most clearly a problem in Aquinas's Christology, Moltmann's emphasis on suffering in the world indirectly keeps the focus on sin. In a world where the legitimacy and dignity of certain bodies are denied, the declaration that Christ took on human flesh offers a clear critique. In becoming real, vulnerable flesh, Christ shows that the human body is to be loved.

Earlier in this chapter, I agreed with Spaemann's idea that personhood should be regarded as being like a family name, since this would avoid reducing personhood to essential properties and allow personhood to be distinct for each person. Thinking about this in relation to Christology, there is the question of what that would mean when related to Christ. Historically, there has been a reluctance to call Christ a human person as it would go against the Chalcedonian definition that he is one person with two natures, because person in this context denotes *hypostasis* rather than human agency. To say that he is a human person raises the question of whether this implies two persons, one divine and one human. In trinitarian theology, personhood is primarily about being a single subject. However, the language of personhood has evolved, and it is necessary to recognise the different ways person is used when it comes to Trinitarian theology and ethics. In the latter, personhood is often about recognition that one is a human agent, deserving of dignity and rights. The absence of personhood allows one to be treated as a thing. When it comes to combining these two spheres, it seems that one has to allow some differentiation of the senses of personhood and argue for both, otherwise, there is a risk that Christ cannot have all that comes with being human. Firstly, one must claim that Christ is

one person with two natures to ensure that he is one subject. But on a second level, he is a human person because in having a human nature, he is truly human and possesses the dignity that comes with being human. In the second sense, there is a need for the caveat that he is not just human.

Having acknowledged the complexities in calling Christ a human person, it should be noted that Spaemann's definition of human personhood would allow for a variety of understandings of Christ's humanity. It can even include prelapsarian humanity, since the central aspect is that one is human. Christ would have a unique place in the human family, but everyone is unique. However, while this may be theoretically possible, it should not be accepted because while there are many ways of being human, all of them involve vulnerabilities and limits. This is an unavoidable part of being human and a part of creation. As argued in Chapter Three (pp.89-91), there is a need to reject even the possibility of a humanity that is invulnerable as it continues to see physical vulnerability as being a result of Original Sin. As the creation of Eve shows, one can challenge this dominant interpretation of Original Sin. As a result, it allows one to claim that Christ's humanity is limited and vulnerable not for the sake of sin but that this is part of being human. It is part of the gift of humanity.

The retention of boundaries between Christ's natures is not to keep his divinity safe but to respect the reality of Christ's humanity. Without clear boundaries, there is a risk of creating ableist dynamics between Christ's two natures. If the human nature is understood as a lack, the result is that the divinity has the potential to function as a curative intrusion. Divinity as an intervention is most obvious in an adoptionist Christology, where God adopts or intervenes in Christ's life, but this curative intrusion can be more subtle in the relationship between the two natures, where the divinity is making up for the deficit found in his humanity. When connected to Christology, this dynamic could be seen in approaches to kenosis that focus on the making of space. This image of making space repeats the concerns in Chapter Three (pp.83-84), that kenosis, if understood to be a form of disablement, suggests a lack or deficit that someone else needs to fill. The problem is not that there is a relationship between Christ's humanity and divinity, but there is a need to retain the ontological integrity of his human nature. Earlier in this chapter, it was pointed out how one of the reasons for hesitancy about an omnipotent God is that it would undermine human freedom, and one can also argue that this would be the case when it comes to Christ. There is a major difference in relation to Christ because in discussing the problem of human freedom one does not wish to suggest that he can be completely divided. As noted in Chapter Four (pp.152-156), Aquinas's treatment of the cross and the unity of

Christ's wills demands real struggle, so that what occurs in Christ is not merely formal but experientially human. This is why emphasising his human nature is key as it helps to ensure that the joy is not forced. It was suggested that the joy was not an intervention but a result of divine aid. *Prima facie,* this might seem to be a contradiction, however, the important factor is how that support is related to Christ, which will be discussed in the next section.

The primary issue is that, in taking on human nature, the dependency and vulnerability that comes with being human is not perceived as a lack. However, the need for ontological integrity applies to his divinity as well. While *perichoresis* tends to be used in relation to the Trinity, Moltmann's use of the communication of idioms can be read as suggesting a kind of Christological *perichoresis*. The properties of one nature are understood to transfer to the other. The human nature penetrates the divine, which is clear from how he treats Christ's suffering in the Garden of Gethsemane. Oliver Crisp warns that communication of idioms and nature-perichoresis are different because the latter has to do with how natures are united whereas the former is how to deal with the seemingly contradictory Christological statements.[667] Yet this distinction becomes difficult to maintain depending on how the communication of idioms is understood. Moltmann's use of the communication of idioms does fulfil what Crisp describes as the purpose of communication of idioms which is to explain the apparent contradiction by saying that there is no contradiction. For Moltmann, qualities like passibility do not require qualification when attributed to the divine, because he holds them to be genuinely divine.

However, Moltmann's language can be read as implying a kind of *perichoresis*, since the transfer of properties between the natures evokes a spatial image of penetration. Crisp observes that defenders of a strong communication of idioms rarely interpret it as the transfer of every property, and that it is usually one-directional.[668] This is also true in Moltmann as it is clearer how what might be regarded as human attributes are transferred to the divine. At the same time, there is a lack of clarity insofar as many of the qualities traditionally given to creation exist in God prior to the action of creation. The hesitation toward such interpenetration arises because it suggests either an absence to be filled or a force exerted.

[667] Cf. Oliver D. Crisp, 'Problems with Perichoresis', *Tyndale Bulletin* 56, no. 1 (2005): 123.
[668] Cf. Crisp, 'Problems with Perichoresis', 128.

5.2.2. Christ as a User of a Mobility Aid

The need for absence, either in divinity or humanity, presumes that space must be made to allow for another. This spatialising of relation is specific to kenotic and perichoretic models, not to the basic creaturely dependence upon God. As shown in the previous section, absence in these models is not neutral; it is paired with a filling-in which functions as penetration. There is a need for care because this penetration has a curative dimension; however, this dynamic needs to be distinguished from being dependent on God. Christ's humanity would not exist without the Word, just like anything else in creation. Rejecting penetrative or curative models of relation does not mean rejecting the possibility of divine aid. The concern being explored in this chapter is whether divine power respects human nature, and this question is important for Christ's humanity as well as humanity in general. But there are some challenges that are unique to Christ because he is not just part of creation but is also God. The main challenge is that the idea that creation is a free gift might seem to suggest that it is a real Other to God. In uniting the Son with humanity, it might seem to lose the otherness of creation. But to repeat again, God's otherness is not based on a contrast as this would permanently separate God from creation. The kind of otherness that is being sought is to make clear that the incarnation is not just an extension or concentration of God. Christ has taken on human nature and there is respect for the particularities of that nature. The question that needs to be considered is how Christ's humanity relates to the divine.

The danger identified is that the suggestion of an absence in Christ's humanity implies that his humanity is not enough and therefore, it needs something else to be complete. It has to become something different, a new kind of being. On such a reading, there would always be a question of whether he is fully human. Rowan Williams, writing on Aquinas's Christology, says "that we do not need to find some sort of absence in the human constitution of Jesus into which the Word can be inserted."[669] It is key that for Christ to be understood to be truly human, he must be like the rest of humanity, and that means respecting what it means to be human. Similarly, Linn Tonstad writes on kenosis and the Trinity from a queer perspective and observes that:

> This symbolic order spatializes kenosis by thinking it as a space-making in which the self must move aside to make room for the other, to be filled by the other, for self and other cannot be in the same place at the same time, as it were. It is no wonder, then, that the emissary logic of this symbolism ties begetting to the imagery of male climax. In contrast, clitoral pleasure does not proceed; it does not penetrate or need penetration. There is no need to make space where there is surface. The skin's surface that reveals

[669] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 32.

> and hides need neither be broken nor invaded for the enjoyment of relation-a phenomenology of touch without violence.[670]

While the focus of this chapter is on Christology and disability rather than the Trinity and sexual relations, it is useful to help think through the problem that is being identified. Tonstad's account is not being used for its sexual imagery, but because of the relational grammar that she offers, such as absence, invasion, and completion, which exposes a penetrative logic where one enters and alters another in order to fix what is perceived as lacking. When mapped onto Christology, this grammar renders the natures asymmetrical, in the sense that one must compensate and the other must be compensated, whether by unilateral intrusion or mutual interpenetration. The assumption in penetrative kenosis or *perichoresis* is that space must be made in order for relation to occur. In this case, it is Christ's two natures which are treated as if they require that there is penetration or invasion. Something else must enter into one nature to make it whole. Earlier in the chapter, it was discussed how there is a need to understand God's providence as respecting the ontological integrity of the human person and this is also important here. Viewing it from a disability perspective, the humanity of Christ means there is no lack or space that needs to be fulfilled. What is rejected is not relationality, but the presumption that relation is achieved only by making space that must then be filled. What is at stake is trying to avoid a curative logic that can be seen as akin to the male climax and how it creates women in which absence is resolved through penetration and filling.

The question is how to understand the relationship between Christ's humanity and the divine, since it raises many of the concerns already discussed in this chapter, particularly the risk of undermining human agency through the logic of absence. The rejection of absence and penetrative relation risks collapsing into an account of humanity as self-sufficient and closed to aid. This is a problem for humanity, but also for Christ in particular. Therefore, a new way is needed to understand how the divine supports the human without falling into a curative logic. It is for this reason that I argue that the image of a mobility aid can help to reimagine this relationship in a way that respects human integrity. The mobility aid avoids the logic of penetration because it does not function through correcting a perceived lack; it assists one's existing capacities without erasing or replacing them. The difference is that a mobility aid is understood to be an extension of the human person, whereas a curative intervention is intrusive and is centred on removing the disability. The concern here is not that medical intervention changes a person's ontology. Humans are mutable, and any account of human nature must recognise their ability to change. The primary focus is on the dynamics of a curative

[670] Linn Tonstad, *God and Difference: The Trinity, Sexuality, and the Transformation of Finitude* (Routledge, 2016), 136.

intervention and the presumption that one must be cured of one's disability, rather than on whether specific interventions are curative or healing.[671]

While this is a challenge for humanity's relationship with God's grace, the focus is on Christ, where there is a particular challenge in ensuring that Christ is sufficiently human. It has been argued that his divinity risks invalidating his humanity. There is a parallel with the experience of using mobility aids, assistive technology or other accommodations. While they often evoke feelings of pity by non-disabled people, particularly when they are visible like a mobility aid, accommodations are not always treated as being just or fair. Siebers points out how they are sometimes interpreted as being an advantage. Writing on Donna Haraway's work on cyborgs, Siebers argues that "in fact they exist everywhere today. Our cyborgs are people with disabilities".[672] The focus is always on the potential to increase of one's abilities, and as a result, Siebers argues, non-disabled people can fail to see disabled people as cyborgs. However, they can also view it as indicating a special ability. Siebers recounts his childhood experience of being challenged to fight by another child, on the condition that Siebers removed his steel leg brace, as it was seen to be an extra weapon. He barely had the strength to lift his leg to do a kick. The story illustrates the belief by many who see "disability as a marvelous advantage."[673]

This misreading of mobility aids as augmentation is precisely the dynamic a disability Christology must avoid: to interpret Christ's divinity as an enhancement of his humanity. Siebers's description of the problems of how using a mobility aid helps to question the assumption that Christ's divinity is giving him any kind of advantage. In Chapter Four (pp.156-

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[671] The line between what is a welcomed medical intervention and what is a curative intervention is a contested space. My focus is on dynamics rather than listing which medical interventions are a problem because they are penetrative, intrusive, and curative. The second point is that the penetration being referred to is not necessarily the surgeon's knife; rather, it concerns being forcefully acted upon in order to make one normal. The reason that heterosexual penetration has been challenged is because it views the male as active over the female who is passive and has less power. In taking this analysis further by looking at disability, the point is not simply that another enters their being but that they either make them normal or make up for the perceived lack in their being. Finally, while a huge emphasis is placed on accepting disabled people as they are, this is not to be seen as a denial of the need for medical care. The ongoing question will be how to help and enable people without suggesting that a person's limits are inherently a problem.

[672] Tobin Siebers, *Disability Theory* (The University of Michigan Press, 2011), 63. For disability theorists, there are a variety of perspectives when it comes to considering the connection between disabled people and cyborgs from furthering ableism to potentially liberating. Part of it is to do with how non-disabled people envision cyborgs which continues to follow the medical model of disability, where the focus is on curing the problem of people's impairments. In this sense, it is not emancipating. On the other hand, the description of people with physical disabilities as cyborgs has been described by Kafer as a means of refusing to "blend in" by embracing one's difference, which differs from how others imagine cyborgs. Cf. Kafer, *Feminist Queer Crip*, 122–23.

[673] Siebers, *Disability Theory*, 64.

157), it was discussed how it was necessary that Christ is not envisioned as a supercrip who overcomes the tragedy of being disabled, and it was emphasised that his divinity does not protect him from the difficulties of being human. Christ, who is fully divine, suffers and dies. The divinity does not prevent him from being human, nor does it offer him any privilege over others. In some ways, one might ask, what then is the relevance of his divinity? But that is to miss the point of the incarnation; he became truly human, and as a result, there is no clear visible sign that he is divine. The approach cannot be to attempt to locate his divinity in his abilities. The divinity of Christ is to be understood as about who Christ is. He is the Word, the second person of the Trinity. There is no gap in his humanity that his divinity explains, nor does his divinity take over when necessary. The analogy only works if Christ's divinity is not understood as compensating for a lack in his humanity.

Understanding Christ through the image of a mobility aid user requires a clear account of Christ's intellect and intentionality, a challenge identified in Chapter Three (pp.96–97). The intentionality of Christ is important because it emphasises that Jesus is the second Person of the Trinity and is the active agent. In emphasising the gift of human nature and its otherness, this is not to imply a rival agency or individual in his humanity. He is one person and agent. To prevent the mobility aid image from implying competing agents, it is necessary to return to the idea of the incarnation as an act of translation, which was discussed in Chapter Three (p.109). Williams describes the incarnation as an act of translation, and as a result, "Just as a translation which left the difficult words in the original would not count as a successful translation, so the human enactment of the life of the eternal Word must be the unbroken performance of a fully and recognizably human life."[674] There is no part of Christ's humanity that is separate from the Word, and at the same time, he lives a life that is completely human. According to Aquinas, Christ's human nature possesses its own human intellect, and this, it can be argued, helps to avoid the charge of penetration. It ensures that Christ is fully human. It is why, even though discussions of Christ's will or intellect seem to suggest that his humanity could exist without the Word, they must be acknowledged, to avoid any suggestion that there is something missing in his humanity. The perfection of Christ's human intellect is to underscore that Christ meant what he said. Williams sees the value of Aquinas's approach in emphasising a single *esse,* in that it allows one to speak of "an uninterrupted created agency which is at the same time in every respect activated, made actually present in the world by the eternal action of the Word."[675] Yet, while intentionality is important, when looking at the cross in Chapter Four (§4.2.1.), there is a difficulty if there is no sense of conflict in Christ's suffering. There is a

[674] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 32.
[675] Williams, *Christ the Heart of Creation*, 32–33.

place for defiant hope and joy, but there is a reason for why it is defiant, because it is a struggle. It does not come easily. This struggle could be understood as an interruption to Christ's agency, but this would be the wrong way to consider it. In choosing to become flesh, Christ has to do justice to the chosen language, to use Williams's image. The language of flesh is passible and mutable, and so there will be struggle as one reaches the limits of being flesh. In reaching the limits of flesh, it is where the mobility aid becomes clearer.

Given the major concerns of this chapter, particularly avoiding divine ableism while also rejecting the idea that refusing penetration entails rejecting divine help, the question becomes where to locate the relationship that the mobility aid is being used to articulate. One could leave it understood as Christ's divinity supporting his humanity without suggesting that it encroaches upon his humanity. This would fit with how wheelchairs are often understood within disability studies as extensions of embodied agency, reflecting a relationship of intimacy where, despite visible separation, there remains a single agent rather than competing agents.[676] While all of this is true, it is my contention that the help provided by the mobility aid is better understood as the Holy Spirit because of his role in the divine economy. John 14:26 describes the Spirit as the paraclete, which is often translated as advocate, comforter, or helper. While this title has different dimensions, including mission and comfort, the key aspect for this study is the idea that the Spirit helps humanity, including Christ. It is not a displacement of his divine nature, but a recognition that he too was helped through the grace given by the Spirit. In using the image of the mobility aid to describe the relationship between Christ's humanity and the Spirit, it must be stated that the purpose is not to create a comprehensive model of the triune relationships. The focus is on the relationship between humanity and the divine, in this case specifically Christ's humanity and the Spirit.

The Spirit supports Christ in his humanity with its limitations, but this help neither supplements nor corrects Christ's human nature. Rather, it presupposes a humanity with its own ontological integrity. In fact, if the Spirit is to have helped Christ, it is necessary that Christ's human nature is clearly articulated as distinct from his divinity. This distinction is central to disability Christology. As the Word, it is not clear that he would need the Spirit's aid according

[676] Disability studies and embodied cognition literature increasingly describe mobility aids as incorporated into bodily agency and experience rather than as merely external tools. Cf. Christina Papadimitriou, 'Becoming En-Wheeled: The Situated Accomplishment of Re-Embodiment as a Wheelchair User after Spinal Cord Injury', *Disability & Society* 23, no. 7 (2008): 691–704; cf. Flora Renz, 'The Boundaries of Legal Personhood: Disability, Gender and the Cyborg', '425-444', *Law and Critique* 35 (2023).

to his divinity. It is only when one either adopts a kenotic Christology that divests the Son of divine prerogatives or recognises that the Son assumes a human nature that it makes sense to speak of the help of the Spirit; but only the latter preserves Christ's humanity without implying the creation of a deficit. The challenge that was identified in Chapter Four (pp.143-144) is that the addition of the Spirit could be read as making the experience easier in the sense of compensating for human limitations. The Spirit may provide comfort, but as was argued this cannot be viewed as an escape from one's circumstances. In general, the Spirit's grace is viewed as helping Christ's human nature without suggesting a lack in his being.

Grace is an enabling force, but it does not mean that one overcomes being a human with limits. Aquinas understands grace as *habitus,* which can be understood as a state or disposition. Grace is an infused gift or habitus given by God and at its most basic, it "draws the rational creature above the condition of its nature to a participation of the Divine good".[677] This description of leading the human person above one's nature has the potential to be seen as suggesting the very dynamic that is being questioned, namely, that "above" entails escaping or cancelling the creaturely limits intrinsic to humanity. On such a reading, vulnerability appears as a defect to be cured rather than intrinsic to humanity. As Simon Oliver argues, grace is not to be viewed as "a force exerted on humanity by God to move people to the beatific vision," because as Aquinas recognises there is a need for an appetite for it as well as something in one's nature that makes the end suitable.[678] It is not a violent push that radically alters the person, rather it flows from one's nature. Famously, Aquinas writes "grace does not destroy nature but perfects it".[679] When considered in relation to Christ, the only person who might be regarded as perfect, he receives the grace of the Spirit, but it does not undo his limitations nor stop him from suffering and being physically weak. It is tempting to make Christ's life entirely about sin, but expanding one's gaze allows one to recognise that his vulnerable human nature needs support for reasons beyond sin. Envisioning the relationship between Christ's human nature and the Spirit as being like a mobility aid means that divine aid can work intimately with humanity without suggesting that something is missing in the human person. Grace works through created capacities rather than negating them.

The image of a mobility aid might seem to keep the focus on individuals rather than images that are more clearly social. But it is a mistake to focus solely on Christ as being an

[677] Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.110.1.
[678] Oliver, *Philosophy, God and Motion*, 127; Cf. Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.110.2.
[679] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.1.8.

individual mobility aid user. Moltmann writes that, "Jesus was not baptized into the Spirit as a private person, but as *pars pro toto,* representatively, as one among many, and as one for many."[680] Moltmann highlights that the reception of the Spirit is not simply for the individual but communal. This could appear to lead to the breaking down of the image of the mobility aid because how does one re-envision this image as a communal one? However, a constant refrain throughout this work has been the need to recognise that all of humanity is needy and Christ's relationship with the Spirit highlights that universal reality, dependency is a condition of creatureliness, not a symptom of deficiency. A more traditional image that could have been used would be the Spirit as breath or air. This image shows human dependency and has a communal element as air is shared, but there is not the same clarity that it enables the human person. The invisibility of the air also makes it easy to take for granted until one develops a respiratory condition. Like the mobility aid, one also runs into the challenge that a respiratory aid is used by an individual.

Rather than try to find an image that makes clear the communal aspect, the point is to foreground the shared condition of need rather than a shared device. Describing Christ as a mobility user highlights the reality that humanity is in need of support. It is not a lack of being when it comes to Christ who was fully human or the rest of humanity. The Spirit, like a mobility aid, enables the person. As McFarland writes, "Grace - the gift of God by which God allows us to be just who we are – does not operate at the expense of our powers, but is precisely that by which our powers operate."[681] This emphasises what has been argued in the first part of this chapter: God's power is not a threat to humanity, but enables it, with all of its vulnerabilities. In the incarnation, Christ does not hide his vulnerability and leans on the Spirit and others. This is the social element to the image: he does not go along with wider society that would have focused on strength, nor does he blend in with the cultural ideals. Christ shows what it means to embrace that creatureliness. It is not a lack because it is precisely what it means to be a creature.

What holds these accounts together is the claim that divine power enables rather than replaces human agency. Divine power has been seen as potentially inhibiting human freedom, but one of the key aspects of envisioning the grace given by the Spirit as a mobility aid is that it makes clear the agency of the human person. There is no suggestion that in experiencing the Spirit's grace, one is experiencing paternalism. For disabled people in particular, grace risks

[680] Moltmann, *The Way of Jesus Christ*, 94.
[681] McFarland, 'The Gift of the Non Aliud', 53.

being interpreted paternalistically, as though others know better than the person themselves. Grace can therefore appear as a divine form of paternalism that overrides human agency. For example, Paul places a greater emphasis on the contribution of God, writing that "But by the grace of God I am what I am … I worked harder than any of them—though it was not I, but the grace of God that is with me." (1 Cor. 15:10) Such an emphasis on grace can appear to collapse human agency into divine causation. But as McFarland observes, in the same letter Paul "appeals to the reader's integrity as responsible agents" (ex. 1:26; 3:26: 3:21-22) as well as referring to his own accomplishment in founding the church in Corinth (9:1). As a result of the wider context of the letter, McFarland writes that the point "is not to displace his [Paul's] own agency, but rather to identify its source."[682] Human agency is not threatened by grace.

Aquinas does understand grace as compatible with human freedom, because divine action operates through, rather than against, the movement of the will. Aquinas writes that God

> moves man to justice according to the condition of his human nature. But it is man's proper nature to have free-will. Hence in him who has the use of reason, God's motion to justice does not take place without a movement of the free-will; but He so infuses the gift of justifying grace that at the same time He moves the free-will to accept the gift of grace, in such as are capable of being moved thus.[683]

In Aquinas's account, God's motion does not displace human agency; it awakens the will to accept what it already has the capacity to receive. A crucial aspect is that grace respects what it means to be human. There is the complication that God is understood to move the free will which could suggest that it is not really free. Eleonore Stump is helpful in this regard, who in her interpretation understands "any good will whatsoever in a human being, is brought about only by God's grace, but that a human being is still ultimately in control of the state of her will, insofar as it is up to her either to refuse grace or to fail to refuse grace, and God's giving of grace depends on the state of her will."[684] Stump's account therefore avoids reading grace as coercive while still preserving human responsibility. Denys Turner refers to Aquinas's view of free will as "libertarian," meaning that "my action is free insofar as I, and only I, am its *created* cause… To the extent that an action of mine can be accounted for in terms of any *created* cause other than my own will, to that extent it fails of freedom."[685] The key aspect is that the conflict arises between created causes, but this is not how God is relating to the human person. Aquinas uses the image of friendship as a way to envision how grace works, in part to highlight that "human wills… are not the *instruments* of the divine agency, as the wills of servants are the

[682] McFarland, 'The Gift of the Non Aliud', 50–51.
[683] Aquinas, *ST*, 1-2.113.3.
[684] Stump, *Aquinas*, 403.
[685] Turner, *Thomas Aquinas*, 157. Emphasis added.

instruments of their master's will, their agency entirely at the disposal of their masters."[686] Friendship here safeguards reciprocity rather than subordination. The mobility aid image does not instrumentalise the Spirit but instead emphasises the agency of the person receiving support. By stressing the importance of free choice, it avoids the suggestion that the human person is not to be trusted and instead emphasises that grace and human agency work together. Grace is therefore not a curative intervention imposed upon deficient humanity, but divine help given to creatures precisely as creatures.

5.3. Disability, Divinity, and the Issue of Language

In this final section, it is necessary to answer a question that has been left mostly unanswered throughout this chapter, which is whether God can be understood as disabled. The question is therefore twofold: whether disability can meaningfully be predicated of God, and whether disability imagery should be used in speaking of God. As the literature review (§1.2.3.) showed, there are many disability theologians who have argued that God should be understood as disabled. It would be a way to avoid any suggestion that God supports ableism and challenge the normative assumptions about disabled people and God. There are several ways that one could make this move, for example, through the concept of kenosis, but another approach is through analogy. The use of analogy has the potential to recognise that disability has knowledge that can help to make sense of God, while also acknowledging the limitations of human language namely, that analogical predication cannot collapse the asymmetry between divine transcendence and the creaturely experience of disability.

The recognition of language's limitations is necessary to avoid making the imagery literal. There is no way to declare that God has any particular disability, because disability is usually based on comparison and there is no one like God. This limitation is indirectly acknowledged in the ways that disability have been related to God by disability theologians which is often done by appealing to concepts like vulnerability or dependence as modes of disability that do not rely on comparative impairment. There is a potential pitfall in describing God as disabled in order to challenge the prevailing norms, because there could be the constant accusation as to whether a particular model makes him disabled enough. This chapter has argued for an understanding of God's power that in his relation to sustaining creation must

[686] Turner, *Thomas Aquinas*, 160. Empasis in original.

respect the integrity of the human person. The position of restricted omnipotence could be analogically regarded as disabled in the sense that there are possibilities that God cannot enact, but not in the sense of lacking proper power. It may not be seen as going far enough, but unless one adopts a panentheist position, there are obstacles in describing God as disabled which cannot go away as the concept of disability is often regarded as a physical reality. Not all dimensions of disability can be included. It must be considered what aspects of disability, if any, can be found in God.

The question that emerges is then how one can undertake the act of translation that is needed to describe God as disabled. To avoid univocal language, one method is to follow Aquinas's approach to language. A statement like "God is good" could be understood in two ways, either it should be understood as a negative statement meaning that God is not bad or that one can say that the effects of what God has caused are good. While that would ensure the transcendence of God, the problem with this approach for Aquinas is that it relies on what God does. He does maintain that there is a relationship between the attributes of God and creation, but at the same time, it needs to be said that God is good without reference to his actions. He causes goodness because he is good. Aquinas writes that "'Whatever good we attribute to creatures, pre-exists in God, and in a more excellent and higher way."[687] Aquinas holds that while one cannot understand God's essence, one can speak of God's perfections that are "represented in the perfections of his creatures."[688] The perfections that Aquinas identifies, for example, goodness, power, being, wisdom, are not thought to be metaphorical but literal because the perfections "flow from Him to creatures".[689] This is because Aquinas is of the view that knowledge of God comes from inference where God can be understood from what he has made. Creation may not be divine, but it is an imperfect mirror of the divine. These qualities are understood to "properly" belong to God rather than to creation.[690] Burrell points out that what Aquinas is doing is "break down this either-or," so that one's language can be understood to not be exactly the same or entirely different.[691]

If the analogical approach only goes in one direction, from God to humanity, it leads to the question of whether the statement God is disabled should be analogical. In describing God as disabled, it would mean it is a positive quality. If God is disabled, it can no longer be claimed

[687] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13.2.
[688] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13.2.
[689] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13.3.
[690] Aquinas, *ST*, 1.13.3.
[691] David B. Burrell, *Aquinas: God and Action* (Routledge, 1979), 115.

to be a deficiency. It is not something shameful and counters the prevailing narratives that disability is an issue of theodicy. The problem with analogy is that while it acknowledges that there is a dissimilarity, there is meant to be something that the word shares with both God and creation. When relating disability to God, one is faced with the question with what is that sameness, it is something that becomes an even greater challenge when one reflects on the reality of the term disability since disability does not name a single stable perfection but a plurality of embodied contingencies. In Chapter One (§1.1.3), the different models of disability were examined and due to the criticisms of the different models, the choice was made that in interpreting disability I would acknowledge both the social and physical realities of disability rather than relying on a single model. The variety of experiences of disability makes it difficult to have a shared core in the concept of disability among humanity, before one turns to the possibility of relating it to the divine. Furthermore, according to Aquinas, these attributes pre-exist in God prior to creation. The challenge is how disability can be understood to be an intrinsic quality of God, especially when analogical predication in Aquinas presupposes perfections, not privations, as the terms of likeness. God is defining what disability is, and as a result, there is a risk of essentialising what disability is.

The potential risk of defining disability through relating it to God has been discussed before in this thesis. In Chapter Four (pp.147-148), it was mentioned that connecting disability to Moltmann's theology of the cross has the potential to define disability as referring to the injustice and the physical and mental suffering. The danger with Aquinas's approach differs to Moltmann, because rather than reducing it to suffering, it could become a perfection, a move that risks abstracting disability away from embodied contingency. Aquinas's view of analogy means that the attribute is properly understood to be possessed by God rather than humanity. If God possesses disability perfectly then he defines what it means to be disabled, not the human person as Aquinas's logic of analogy requires. As part of holding the tensions of disability together, there is the need to hold onto both the negative and positive experiences of disability without letting either being allowed to define disability. But by making it a quality possessed by God, it risks overlooking the negative aspects of being disabled. The problem is compounded by the fact that Aquinas's idea of analogy is based on finding the perfections of God that are reflected in the world. John Wippel describes the perfections found in both God and creation as "varying degrees of perfection."[692] Moltmann is critical of analogy because this kind of natural knowledge may be possible, but he argues that people use it for "self-exaltation" and "self-

[692] John F. Wippel, *Metaphysical Themes in Thomas Aquinas II*, Studies in Philosophy and the History of Philosophy (The Catholic University of America Press, 2007), 73.

divinization."[693] One of the issues from the perspective of disability in particular is that some of the attributes that Aquinas identifies have the potential to put them on the lower levels of this hierarchy. But when disability is related to the divine there are new issues to consider. The question is whether it forces a particular perspective of one's disability on disabled people. If God is thought of as disabled who is always positive, it could create a hierarchy of disabled people in terms of how they think of their disabilities. The good disabled person is the one who is positive. While there has been a constant desire to ensure that disability is not seen solely in negative terms, it is also necessary that disability is not deemed entirely positive as this does not recognise the real challenges of being disabled.

Given these initial remarks on language, one might remark that there is reason to be hesitant in calling God disabled. But the problem is this hesitation raises the question of what does it mean to deny disabled people the opportunity to call God disabled? Some feminist theologians, like Elizabeth Johnson, have argued that an absence of female imagery continues to uphold the patriarchy.[694] To say that God cannot be described as disabled would similarly mean that to be an icon of God does not include disability. Like women's embodiment, the suggestion that disability must be excluded retains the ableist paradigm; it marks disability as an improper or illegitimate mode of imaging God.

Johnson observed that while Aquinas acknowledges that the bible uses maternal images as well as fraternal imagery, he argued that calling God Father was more appropriate as women's contribution to reproduction is completely passive, unlike the male contribution, because God is pure act.[695] Aquinas's view is based on outdated science, but what is worth noting is that disabled people, like women, would seem to be contrary to the divine because they are opposite to the non-disabled man who is made normative. The non-disabled person is seen to be capable, unlike the disabled person who is viewed as incapable. This perspective needs challenging and therefore, like women, disabled people must be recognised as capable of reflecting God, legitimising the disabled God. Disability is not a deviation from the *imago Dei*, but a site through which the image of God can be revealed. According to Aquinas, God is not understood to be literally male or non-disabled and yet there is a disconnect with his belief that all of creation reflects God imperfectly. In practice, the non-disabled man is taken as a better reflection. This passivity that Aquinas identifies is what makes the image as inappropriate, but

[693] Moltmann, *The Crucified God*, 218.
[694] Cf. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.*, 65.
[695] Cf. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse.*, 54.

the result is that he does not consider how the non-male and non-disabled person may reflect God.

In order to undo the binaries that associate male and non-disabled people on one side and women and disability on the other, one must not only expand the images used for God but also affirm divine transcendence and take seriously its implications. This chapter has considered divine power and yet at the same time, there is an acknowledgment that the language is imperfect. Neither the language of strength nor of weakness fully capture who God is. The problem, however, has historically been that only some qualities have been allowed to be used. Passivity or weakness, therefore, should not be treated as the essential features of being disabled. Writing on disabled communities, Piepzna-Samarasinha has pointed out that it is easy to undervalue what disabled people offer each other because "internalized ableism has taught us that *it's not possible for disabled people to do anything, and the things we do are not real*."[696] In rejecting disabled images of God, one is also rejecting the contributions of disabled people. It continues to highlight only some people as really reflecting God.

Disabled imagery is needed but at the same time, it is also necessary that there is no attempt to define what disability is in a divine sense. The inability to fully define what disability is might seem to make calling God disabled meaningless, but this is not a unique problem. Many of the categories that are used to categorise human persons are not defined neatly. Human identity terms veil as much they reveal, because there is a plethora of human experiences that are hidden by these categories that make it difficult to define what they mean. Rather than attempt to essentialise what these categories mean, placing terms like Black, female, or disabled in front of God is a way of signalling God's preference. The identification is to express that God is on the side of the marginalised and oppressed groups. Transcendence does not mean that God transcends the call for justice, any more than God's universal love. Writing on the preferential option for the poor, Roberto Goizueta writes that, "To say that God's love is universal is not to say that it is neutral. In fact, it is to say the opposite: precisely *because* God's love is universal, it *cannot* be neutral."[697] God rejects the status quo. He cares and therefore, is on the side of those who are marginalised, who experience most acutely the reality of sin in the world. To say that God is disabled is a declaration against a world that treats disability as something to be

[696] Piepzna-Samarasinha, *The Future Is Disabled*, 84. Emphasis in original.
[697] Roberto S. Goizueta, 'The Preferential Option For the Poor: Christ and the Logic of Gratuity', in *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century*, ed. Robert Lassalle-Klein (Orbis Books, 2011), 177.

ashamed of and to hide. While God is transcendent, his commitment is not with those who support ableism, but with those who suffer due to ableism.

God's commitment to humanity is so deep that he became human. While it is impossible to say that Christ had any particular disability, by focusing on the dynamics of disability one can understand God was disabled analogically, in the sense that he faced real limits and vulnerability that came with his human nature. His flesh could be harmed, he hungered and thirsted, but these limits are not merely biological but relational. Moltmann was correct to stress the importance of Christ's relationships. He was found on the outskirts of society, and this shows his commitment to the marginalised. Christologies that focus on Christ's two natures are often seen as ignoring this aspect of what Christ reveals about God. However, the social commitment of God and the two natures of Christ work together. Christ is with people both as someone who shares their experiences and is one of them. It is affirmed through not simply the Word being present but being human like them.

As discussed in Chapter Two (pp.50-54), there are tensions in describing disability as accidental rather than essential, particularly when disability is experienced as integral to one's identity. Yet, as explored in Chapter Three (pp.86–90), a distinct challenge emerges once disability or infirmity is related to Christ specifically: there is a presumption that disability is something in need of saving. There is a need to ensure that disability is not being used only as a sign of something that is wrong with the world. Disability cannot be fitted into a simple binary of being entirely negative or entirely positive, which complicates how it is related to Christ. This is why Creamer's model of limits is important. By understanding limits as part of what it means to be human helps to avoid forcing Christ into a binary in which he must be disabled or not. The clear distinction between Christ's natures affirms humanity as it is. The problem is not God's divinity, but the othering of some human bodies. Through Christ's humanity and actions, he identifies with them.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that disability belongs to Christ's humanity and not to his divinity, and that this distinction preserves both divine transcendence and human integrity. The argument was conducted in two phases, firstly, examining how divinity relates to humanity and then to

Christ's humanity, focusing on avoiding a curative dynamic to the relationships. Beginning with how God relates to humanity, the reaffirmation of transcendence ensures that human social concepts are not upheld in God. The harmful binaries created by humans, such as disabled and non-disabled people, are not supported by God. Transcendence means that there is a clear distinction between God and the world. While Aquinas argues that there is no real relation on the side of God, it is more accurate to understand God's relationship with the world as unique. He is not distant but close to his creation. They are united, yet the distinction protects the integrity of the human person.

From this account of transcendence, the chapter then reconsidered divine power, particularly because this attribute has been questioned due to its potential to make God tyrannical and promote hierarchies. It was argued that aseity and omnipotence are best understood through the lens of gift-giving. God's aseity is not a valorisation of independence but an affirmation of creation's dignity and gratuity. Creation is understood to be a gift, and it is good to exist, without the emphasis on expectation. Aquinas's account nevertheless requires further clarification regarding the different operations of divine power. Recognising different registers of divine power allows creation to be differentiated from God's sustaining and saving activity. *Creatio ex nihilo* is not a dominating act because there is nothing to have power over. Yet once creation exists, absolute power becomes a concern. It suggests that God may not respect the agency of the human person. This idea of gift requires that God has a relation with humanity that respects its ontological integrity. This does not imply that he wants to radically transform what it means to be human, because humanity itself is given as a gift. Human agency is real, but secondary to the more fundamental point that the human person is a gift. This is a direct challenge to a culture that focuses on human action.

The next move was to reconsider relational ontology, which has been favoured by many disability theologians because it acknowledges other people and therefore, it challenges the view that humans are rational, independent beings. However, it must be asked whether this approach is as inclusive as believed or if it requires another set of skills to be seen as a person. Moltmann's account of friendship is expansive and thereby allows for valuing smaller actions. It also does not require reciprocation. It is an account of relationships that would appear to be open to people with disabilities. However, Moltmann fails to connect it to the statements about what a lack of relationship means for the human person. He does not view the human person as simply being constituted by relations, but he does not explain what an individual is outside of them. Isolated lives are seen to be deficient, but this has consequences for how personhood is

attributed to those who live in isolation. Personhood is grounded in being human before it is expressed through relations.

Therefore, a need arose to look beyond human relations for personhood because of what it means for personhood when human relations are not functioning. Even when human relationships fail, God continues to recognise and affirm one's personhood. Moltmann's approach, with its eschatological focus, may keep the questions of suffering open but he does so by failing to articulate creation's goodness now. Moltmann's theology takes subjective feelings of abandonment and turns them into objective reality by placing them into the Trinitarian relationships. There is a deficit in creation that has to be overcome eschatologically. Raising questions about social ontology clarifies that the human person is not simply a product of relations but the subject to whom relations happen. There is a need to appreciate that human personhood is a result of being a human being. The content of human nature must remain modestly defined to avoid essentialism, yet it must nevertheless be affirmed as real.

The reflections on God and how God and creation relate to each other have consequences for Christology. Christ is the meeting of humanity and divinity. One of the issues identified with Moltmann's approach is that in stressing the unity of Christ, he does not adequately give an account of how Christ's natures differ. The only clear difference that he articulates is that Christ's humanity is embodied, but there is no sense of a distinct human nature. As a result, Christ's humanity risks being absorbed into divinity as if embodiment alone exhausts its meaning. Moltmann argues that keeping the two natures separate is in order to protect the divine nature, but this ignores the need to safeguard Christ's human nature. This is important from a disability theology perspective as it ensures that Christ's humanity with its limits and vulnerabilities is real. This is why an understanding of kenosis as the assumption of humanity rather than the creation of an absence is needed, as it clarifies that human nature is not a deficit and does not focus primarily on Christ's suffering. It is keeping the two natures as distinct that makes clear that Christ's humanity is real and possesses its own ontological integrity. There is no need for a curative intervention in order to reduce the limits that come with being human. This is particularly important for people with disabilities whose limits are routinely problematised and treated as conditions needing a cure.

There is a need to understand Christ's divinity in such a way that it does not undermine his humanity, and the image of a mobility aid was proposed in order to distinguish between

dependency on others and an invasive medical cure. What a mobility aid focuses on is enabling the disabled person rather than working to cure the person of their disability. Both mobility aids and divine support risk being read as compensatory advantages that can invalidate the recipient's humanity and their limits. When it comes to Christ's divinity, it is a mistake to attempt to identify it in any of his actions. The key point is that the Word is living a genuinely human life with the conditions that come with it. To attempt to identify a place where his divinity takes over is to suggest a gap or deficit in humanity. The Word is the agent, and his actions are to be understood as intentional. Yet at the same time, this intentionality cannot be used to diminish his struggles. These struggles are part of reaching the limits of the flesh; they are part of his humanity.

It is not primarily Christ's divinity which is to be understood as supporting his humanity, but the Holy Spirit as his mobility aid. The Spirit gives strength to Christ in his humanity without turning Christ's humanity into something else. The Spirit as a mobility aid can only make sense if one can speak of Christ having limits. The issue with Moltmann's approach is that part of the reason the Son needs the Spirit is because he was abandoned. Dependency and need are a result of a negative experience in this account and as a result continues to mean disability is a tragedy. In contrast, understanding Christ's humanity as helped reveals that vulnerability and limitation are not pathologies to be overcome but constitutive features of creaturehood. Christ shows what it means to be human and to embrace it fully, which requires the help of others. The Spirit does not threaten human agency rather, it is necessary that the Spirit works with the human person rather than treating them as simply an instrument. To use a mobility aid, one must work together, and this includes the cooperation of the human person. The Spirit aids Christ's humanity not because it is deficient, but because it is human.

The final part of this chapter examined in what way God is to be thought of as disabled. On one level, being committed to transcendence, in part because of how it allows one to challenge the binaries that humans have created, suggests that the logical next step is to deny that God is able-bodied or disabled. Aquinas's approach to analogy was examined as a way to say that God is disabled but not in an equivocal way. The difficulty with such an approach is that analogical predication requires some shared perfection, and disability is not a stable perfection but a contingent condition; identifying a core element risks essentialising disability. Disability when made divine means creating a normative perspective on what disability means.

Despite these hesitancies about calling God disabled, it is necessary to use disability imagery to counter the prevalence of able-bodied images. Disabled people are no more contrary to the divine than non-disabled people. Disability imagery signals divine commitment to disabled people; it interrupts the presumption that God stands only with able-bodied norms. God loves humanity with their vulnerabilities and limits to such a degree that the Son took on their nature. Moltmann was right to point to the social dimension of the incarnation. Yet affirming Christ's humanity strengthens that solidarity: by becoming a vulnerable human, he affirms other vulnerable humans. Christ is not disabled because divinity lacks power, but because human nature is genuinely assumed, with its limits, fragility, and need.

Conclusion

This work has sought to develop a more systematic disability Christology. Disability theology has long been interested in how Christ's body relates to disability, but sustained, systematic Christologies remain scarce. This thesis proceeds within that developing conversation. In the introduction, I argued that disability is a necessary hermeneutical lens because it takes seriously the reality of creation with its limits and vulnerabilities and questions why these attributes are treated as shameful or abnormal. Christ assumes a human nature, which means that his humanity is intimately connected to the status of the human person, and therefore, a disability hermeneutic asks how Christ shares in the human reality of limits and vulnerabilities. I have argued that disability Christology should centre on respecting the limits and integrity of Christ's human nature, which is best served through the two-nature approach. This approach makes clear that Christ is fully human and that there is no suggestion that either nature compensates for a lack in the other. Christ's experience of the same human nature, with its vulnerabilities and limits, demonstrates that these are not opposed to the good life but belong to the life he chose to live. Engaging Aquinas and Moltmann has shown both the challenges and possibilities of this claim: while Aquinas struggles to allow Christ to be fully vulnerable, Moltmann offers a more socially attuned account of dependence and mutual aid; conversely, where Moltmann foregrounds suffering, Aquinas provides resources that preserve joy and agency. Together, they illustrate the tension within disability Christology between affirming vulnerability and avoiding the assumption that suffering is definitive. From a disability hermeneutic, Christology compels one to consider how divinity engages human vulnerability in a way that honours both human limitation and the integrity of human nature.

The question that I asked in this thesis is what disability reveals about Christ's humanity and its relationship with his divinity. My response consists of three major claims. Firstly, in examining Christology from a disability hermeneutic, it has shown that Christ's human nature must be given sufficient limits in order that it is real and taken to be like the rest of humanity. While this may appear to be an obvious claim, there is an ever-present danger of compulsory able-bodiedness which can result in the preference of certain attributes in Christ and deny him key aspects that come with being part of creation. The second claim is that disability is not to be related to Christ simply through the experience of suffering, because it can reduce disability to suffering, even as suffering cannot be ignored. I have argued that if suffering on the cross is allowed to dominate the cross, to the extent that Christ has been abandoned by the Father, then to connect it to disability means it is being defined by the

experience of oppression and absence. This argument exposes a need for a counternarrative to make clear that suffering does not dominate one's view of disability or creation. The third claim is that the relationship between Christ's two natures must respect the integrity of each nature, otherwise, one risks creating a space or a lack which can be viewed as a disability which is cured by the intrusive intervention of another. While both natures can be viewed as having a lack that is filled by the other, it is particularly a concern for Christ's humanity which could be treated as being like a puppet and therefore, it fails to respect the particularities of that nature. There cannot be any gap that is filled by the divine nature. This is not a rejection of help but an intervention to make clear that the help does not require any intrusion or space-making. These three claims are now brought together to reflect on their significance for the argument as a whole.

I have argued that Christ's human nature must be grappled with in such a way that allows his humanity to have real limits and vulnerabilities. The spectre of Docetism hangs over Christology and therefore, there is a constant fear that Christologies do not allow Christ to be truly human, particularly in two areas, Christ's human physicality and intellect. In Chapter Three, I argued that there is a need to move away from Aquinas's view that Christ's physical vulnerabilities and defects are to be understood as a result of taking on the consequences of Original Sin. This framing means that vulnerabilities and limits are not allowed to be viewed neutrally, as part of the makeup of creation but instead continues to place physical reality in a normative frame. The corruptibility of human flesh is not as God intended and therefore, Christ could have existed as legitimately human without hunger, thirst, and other vulnerabilities. Aquinas's view that creation is dependent and finite, is a statement that creation is not God, but this does not go far enough to affirm the goodness of creation with its vulnerabilities and limits now. There is a need to allow human nature to have its limits and vulnerabilities and not to fixate on possible humanities, whether prelapsarian or postlapsarian. Otherwise, one risks viewing humanity as currently disabled in the medical sense. But Aquinas's approach to kenosis, interpreted as an addition to Christ's divinity rather than a subtraction, helps to emphasise that the incarnation, the taking on of humanity with its limits, is not to be interpreted as a loss. The reading of kenosis means human nature is being respected, but this requires that humanity is allowed to be vulnerable, dependent on others, and with limits. Christ in his humanity cannot be thought to possess himself perfectly because that is not part of being human. To claim as Aquinas does that Christ kept his bodily vigour on the cross is to undermine this basic reality that comes with being human and risks making Christ a supercrip.

In looking at Moltmann, one was presented with an approach that does not just focus on the physical vulnerability that comes with the incarnation but extends the social aspect of Christ's embodiment. Christ did not just become flesh but chose to share the same social situation as those who have been dehumanised. This makes clear that, in becoming human, he has come to challenge the social realities that create disabled or oppressed people by becoming one of them. The repeated difficulty with Moltmann's approach is that while he rejects the idea of Original Sin, his eschatological orientation means that the constant focus is on what needs to change, and this is not just how oppressed people are made ashamed of who they are but includes the makeup of creation, which he views as subject to futility. This limits the way disability can be understood, because at present, there is a struggle to affirm the goodness of creation. Moltmann helps to make clear Christ's vulnerabilities and limits and that he is impacted and connected to those around him. This perspective provides a greater understanding of the vulnerability of Christ's humanity, particularly in relation to social structures. This is needed for a disability Christology that centres on allowing Christ to be human, because doing so means he needs to be contingent. Without the sense that there is a goodness that comes with creation currently, there will be a sense of loss that comes with the incarnation. After all, Moltmann understands the cross as the centre of the incarnation and, therefore, implies that to take on human nature is to suffer with creation.

I observed in Chapter Three that it is easier to allow Christ to be physically vulnerable for Aquinas because the human intellect is of greater importance for Christ's soteriological mission. The reasoning is clear: for Christ in his humanity to be actively articulating revelation, it is necessary that, as a human, he perfectly understands revelation, and so Aquinas argues that Christ's intellect does not lack anything. From a disability perspective, the problem is not that Christ has a high level of knowledge; the problem is the value that is being placed on that knowledge and its fullness, and the focus on independence and agency. Aquinas does not see Christ in his humanity as omniscient because Christ is understood to have limits according to his nature, but at times Aquinas makes claims, such as that Christ could know the number of pebbles in a river innately, that seems to be excessive for the human person. To suggest that Christ has an intellectual disability appears to undermine his agency, but this is to presume that agency is demonstratable, when the reality is that it is something must be presumed rather than proven by someone's capabilities. Christ, like people with intellectual disabilities, is not to be understood as missing anything that makes one human, whether that is intellect or agency.

In arguing that Christ possesses the beatific vision, it becomes clear that Christ's human nature is co-operating with the divine, otherwise there is a risk of suggesting that Christ is disabled in the sense of a lack, as though he were unable to know God as a human, and this knowledge must be supplemented by his divinity. Christ's knowledge is not to be equated simply with general knowledge; what is much more important is that Christ has perfect human knowledge of God, and therefore, it allows him to translate who God is in a human medium. But I argue that the aspect of Christ's beatific vision that is not sufficiently appreciated in Aquinas is that it is subject to the limits of Christ's nature. While no one else prior to the resurrection is understood to possess beatific vision, this aspect makes clear that the limits of knowledge are not to be viewed as necessarily being a problem; it does not make people with an intellectual disability an Other to Christ or anyone else. Being subject to humanity's limits does not undermine Christ's beatific vision and makes clear that limits are not contrary to one's agency. But, as I argue in Chapter Four, there is a need for greater appreciation that while beatific vision points to what humanity will experience after the resurrection, there is a need to appreciate that there is a sense of struggle, because there are moments that are hard to translate, and Christ's human nature is subject to time. Subjectively, there are moments where Christ might be straining to feel what he knows to be true.

What is a greater challenge is Aquinas's view that Christ can learn from his senses, but that it is most appropriate that he learns independently. The problem is that it emphasises human self-sufficiency and fails to recognise the important contributions of others. Moltmann, in contrast, argues for Christ learning from others, both human and divine persons, and therefore, allows for Christ to be interdependent. Moltmann thus takes seriously that being human involves limits and the need for others, in a way absent Aquinas's approach. It does not mean that there is any possibility of supporting any hierarchy, but instead promotes collaboration, and encourages recognising knowledge in places overlooked. But the problem with Moltmann, is that because he does not support a differentiation between Christ's natures, and instead treats them as unified, therefore, the distinction between the divine and human becomes blurred. In emphasising the relational unity of the Father and Son and grounding Christology in relational ontology, Moltmann risks losing the sense that the Son is the agent and communicator who becomes human. Recognising that Christ does not have to learn everything on his own makes clear the limits of his humanity, but this does not have to result in creating an absence in Christ. It can be answered by differentiating between kinds of causes. Christ, as Son, can know and be the cause behind him learning from others, while also having the genuine human experience of learning from others. It makes clear that Christ does not diminish to become human, rather he takes on the human condition completely, and this involves being able

to learn from others. This approach ensures that one does not conceive of there being a gap or an absence in Christ that allows him to be human. As I argued in Chapter Five, this would mean that there is an incompatibility between the divine and creation. They can co-exist without forcing one to conform to the other.

The second central claim that I have made is that disability should not be related to Christ only through Christ's suffering on the cross, because doing so continues to treat disability as a topic for theodicy. One of the key aims of this thesis is to approach disability in a way that allows for greater complexity than the narrative that equates disability with pain and suffering, while also acknowledging that disability can involve suffering. In Chapter Four, I argued that Moltmann portrays the Father as abandoning Christ and therefore, takes part in the disablement of Christ. While this is viewed by Moltmann as creating solidarity because Christ has joined in humanity's cries against God, I argued that the problem is that it takes the painful and unjust experiences of what happens to the body and makes them part of the divine life, which consequently makes those experiences a defining feature. There is a need to affirm the goodness of creation as it is presently, and to move away from a tragic view of creation. Moltmann's relational approach, along with the lack of Chalcedonian distinction, means that there is no counternarrative to make clear that one is not compromised simply by the treatment of others.

While Aquinas can be criticised for not allowing Christ to be sufficiently vulnerable because he retains too high a level of control both mentally and physically, I argued that his view that Christ suffers and is joyful is key to ensuring that the suffering is not viewed as the entire narrative. The joy must be reinterpreted as a form of resistance to the world that attempts to shame people for their vulnerabilities, for their limits, and for who they are. Christ is not only willing to assume a vulnerable human nature, he embraces it without shame. Aquinas's kenotic account, understood as addition rather than subtraction, makes clear that human nature is fragile but is good and worth affirming. It does not require that one is self-sufficient or strong, because these qualities are not found in Christ's humanity. The problem is not human nature, but the attitudes and the structures that exclude, shame, and harm. The goal is not to escape one's limits and vulnerabilities, but to recognise people's inherent dignity and find ways to live authentically with one's limits. To look beyond what happens to the body is not to ignore the problems, but to recognise that the treatment of the body does not conform to the dignity of the human person, nor to the idea that it is a gift from God. Disability Christology requires a

stronger narrative to counter those who confine disability to suffering than Christ joining in the suffering, it needs to be strongly asserted that the act of disablement does not define him.

Thirdly, I have argued that the relationship between Christ's two natures must respect the integrity of each nature to avoid any suggestion that either nature lacks something that must be supplied by the other. In Chapter Five, I argued that the relationship between Christ's two natures is analogous to the relationship between God and creation, where neither side competes nor displaces the other. Both relationships should not be understood as being in conflict, but as cooperation. While God's omnipotence and aseity could be interpreted as ableist, promoting the values of strength and self-sufficiency, the non-competitive approach that I argued for means that God's power is not to be understood as forceful, but rather as pure gift. Aquinas's double agency helps to differentiate between causes, which means that there is no conflict between human agency and divine agency. However, it is helpful to differentiate between God's power to create, sustain, and save. Doing so makes clear that God respects the integrity of creation, working within the structures of the world, which can be obscured by the power to create *ex nihilo* and to save. The framing of God's power as pure gift means that God accepts humanity and recognises its goodness; therefore, God does not want to completely transform humanity.

The relational approach allows people to be impacted and formed by others, but the problem is what relationships are understood to be constitutive of the human person. I argue that it is God's faithful relationship with humanity, not other people, that is the basis of one's personhood. This flows from the idea that one is a gift of God. The relational approach found in Moltmann risks suggesting that there is a gap in one's personhood, which means that a person needs other people to impact and to be impacted by in order to be a person. It is not personhood that is lacking, but recognition of personhood, and that recognition is found in mutual relation with God.

The integrity of creation is tied to the integrity of Christ's human nature, for Christ assumes a human nature that remains distinct from his divine nature. Respect for each nature is essential if the union of natures is not to be interpreted in curative terms, as though one nature compensates for a lack in the other. Moltmann stresses the unity between Christ's natures to the point that they cannot be separated; though he treats Christ's humanity as real, it risks losing its distinctive nature, particularly when vulnerability is treated as a divine attribute. Furthermore, the *perichoresis* that is hinted at in his treatment of communication of idioms suggests that there

is a space that needs to be filled by another. It suggests Christ requires penetration so that the divine and human can be united. This creates a curative logic where there is a need to fill in the gap rather than coexistence of integrity. For disability Christology, resisting this curative logic is essential: disability must not function as a metaphor for deficiency, nor Christ's humanity as a site needing repair, but as a witness to the inherent dignity and completeness of embodied limitation.

The Chalcedonian distinction means that the integrity of each nature is respected and that neither nature should be treated as lacking something required for relation. Each can be fully itself. It does not mean that there is no help or relation. Chapter Five developed the image of a mobility aid to show how divinity can relate in a way that avoids curative intervention that seeks to normalise or cure. It enables the person within their limits. The Spirit's aid does not give Christ an advantage, nor does assistance mean that he is lacking agency. For a mobility aid to work, there must not be any suggestion that the user and the mobility aid are in conflict. This image helps to make clear that the divine's relationship with Christ's human nature is not correcting his limits but is supporting and sustaining him.

Ultimately, I argue that while God can be called disabled, strictly speaking, it should be Christ who is understood as disabled because he assumes a human nature with its limits. There are challenges that come with identifying God specifically with disability as it would require a clearer definition of disability. It risks creating an idea of what it means to be perfectly disabled as though disability exists first and primarily in God. Divine transcendence means that God is beyond the binary of disabled and non-disabled, but there is a repeated problem that the language of strength is treated as being more appropriate than weakness, because God is pure act. This assumption needs to be challenged. Disability must not be equated with passivity or incapacity, and therefore, there is a need for disabled images to enter into the theological imagination.

Rather than attempt to essentialise what disability is, I argue that describing God as disabled should be understood as an expression of God's preference, God's self-identification with the marginalised. This commitment is expressed in the Son's assumption of a human nature and in being with those who were on the outskirts of society. The social and physical dimensions belong together: Christ is not only present with the marginalised but shares their vulnerabilities and limits. He is not just identifying with what has gone wrong with the world,

but is showing the goodness, the gift of creation. Christ becoming disabled is best understood through kenosis as addition, not subtraction, revealing the goodness of being a vulnerable human.

This thesis contributes to the emerging field of disability Christology, because it provides an account that engages both with classical and modern Christology through a disability hermeneutic. In bringing together Aquinas and Moltmann in dialogue, this study has put forward a systematic disability Christology. It challenges many of the presumptions currently found in disability theology, including the assumption that the classical distinction between Christ's two natures has little to offer, as well as some of the problems with social ontology and connecting disability with Christ's suffering on the cross. The non-competitive understanding of human and divine relationships, which is supported by the Chalcedonian distinction, resists the potential for curative interpretations of relations. Furthermore, while there is an appreciation that disability theology must resist a curative logic, there has not been an appreciation of how relations between people could have a curative dimension. This has the potential to expand the areas where one can use a disability hermeneutic beyond healing narratives and eschatology. Kenosis is to be understood as the addition of humanity, which makes clear that Christ did not create a gap in himself. This model of kenosis affirms the goodness of creation with its limits and reframes vulnerability not as a defect but as a constitutive aspect of humanity. In doing so, this thesis extends the scope of both systematic theology and disability studies, demonstrating that the assumption of a limited human nature by the Word reveals the integrity and dignity of creation itself.

In developing a disability Christology, there are endless directions that one could have pursued and many themes that could have been explored in greater depth. While this study has offered one systematic attempt to articulate a disability Christology, its scope was necessarily limited. One area where there is room for further development is how it relates to sin and salvation. This work sought to view Christ beyond the narrow lens of soteriology, which was not to deny the reality of injustice or sin, but to expand the scope of Christology. As it became apparent with Aquinas's treatment of Christ's vulnerabilities in Chapter Three, if soteriology is allowed to dominate one's Christology, it limits the way in which those vulnerabilities can be interpreted. They are confined to being defects that have been taken on as part of healing the world from sin. It constrains those limits conceptually. A disability hermeneutic allows one to view Christ's vulnerabilities differently, asking whether they must be viewed in a negative light. At the same time, one cannot avoid the issue of sin. While I have spoken of the injustices

that people with disabilities experience and the injustice of the cross, further work could examine how sin relates to the rejection of human finitude. As Leonard Davis observes, to examine disability requires examining the construction of normality, as they shape each other; if discomfort with human vulnerability is itself a symptom of sin, then future research must ask how Christ's redemptive work addresses not only those who are othered, but those who do the othering.[698] I have argued that Christ shamelessly accepts human limits, and this must be complemented with a deeper account of those who resist such acceptance.

I have argued for an understanding of Christ that emphasises both the social and the physical aspects of his person, though the scope of this study has allowed only a partial engagement with his life as presented in the gospel narratives. There is scope to further develop the social dimension of Christ's life, such as how Christ's assumption of a vulnerable human nature confronts the structures that support compulsory able-bodiedness, and the stories of Christ healing others. There is a need to engage further with the bodily ideals of the Roman Empire, and how Christ's life challenges these ideals. Compulsory able-bodiedness attempts to stop disruptive bodies, but Christ's shameless acceptance of human limits is disruptive, and, therefore, the question is how to connect this understanding with the healing narratives that alienate many disabled people. This has the potential to be transformational for church practices and for the place of disabled people in the church.

While this study centred on Christ, the argument inevitably had to engage with the other two persons of the Trinity, raising questions that went beyond the scope of this work. Having argued that interpenetration between Christ's two natures should be avoided because of its curative implications, a similar question arises for Trinitarian personhood. In understanding God as being Triune, one is faced with how to understand the three persons as being distinct from one another, so that they are not reducible to one another. The different persons of the Trinity are traditionally made distinct by their relationships with one another, and, therefore, each person needs the other two persons. The question is whether there is a gap in each person that requires the intervention of the other. Further work could explore how to avoid this curative logic and whether one must build on Karen Kilby's suggestion of an apophatic understanding of the Trinity.[699] Disability points to the fact that there is a need for one another, but there is a need to be careful in considering how to conceptualise that need for one another.

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[698] Cf. Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy*, 2.
[699] Cf. Karen Kilby, 'Is an Apophatic Trinitarianism Possible?', *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 12, no. 1 (2010): 65–77.

A further area for development is the role of the Spirit. I have argued that divine aid, particularly the aid given by the Spirit, is to be understood as respecting the nature of humanity rather than curing a perceived lack. But the question that remains is what the Spirit's role is beyond the present moment, particularly where eschatology and pneumatology converge. As Sharon Betcher warns, the Spirit has often been seen as the "agent of final perfection," and therefore, the Spirit can be a force to eschatologically normalise.[700] The focus of this work was on the present moment to help emphasise the goodness of creation, but as I have stated repeatedly throughout this work, this is not to accept the status quo. The goodness of creation is not the same as the perfection of creation. Any future account of liberation must consider how the Spirit works while remaining attentive to the giftedness and integrity of created being.

I want to return to the title of this work, *The Word Became Disabled,* because it captures the core of what has been argued. In suggesting that Christ became disabled, the claim is not to indicate that Christ lost anything; it is not kenotic in the sense of a loss or setting aside of any divine attributes. Rather, it is another way of expressing the claim in John 1:14 that "The Word became flesh." The central argument of this study is that kenosis and disability are not about loss, but about the addition of a vulnerable human nature with limits. The idea that John 1:14 and the title of this work can be regarded as almost interchangeable makes clear that disability is not other to humanity but draws attention to the reality of human existence with its vulnerability and dependence. It also resists the idea that one must point to an absence or deficiency in the person, because this makes the connection with disability focus on a deficit or loss. A disability perspective instead affirms that human nature, with all its limits, is good. It is in the Word's becoming disabled that the goodness of creaturely vulnerability is most fully revealed.

[700] Betcher, *Spirit and the Politics of Disablement*, 37.

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