

“THOSE WHO CANNOT SEE THE WHOLE ARE OFFENDED BY THE APPARENT DEFORMITY OF A PART”: DISABILITY IN AUGUSTINE’S *CITY OF GOD*

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ABSTRACT

In *De ciuitate Dei* (*ciu.*), Augustine famously calls people with disabilities created on purpose by an absolutely competent God (16.8). On the whole, however, Augustine’s views on disabilities in *ciu.* are often misunderstood. The statement about the creation of people with disabilities is part of a discussion of the theodicy question that implies that the goodness of people with disabilities is not open to experience and must be accepted on faith. This negative background assumption results from Augustine’s view that dignity emerges from the embodied beauty, rationality, and utility of the ensouled body (22). Augustine gives several examples of how disabilities reduce dignity along with these dimensions, as “deformity defeats beauty” (19.4). In eternal salvation, however, disabilities will be removed (22). Martyrs will perhaps retain scars in heaven, but these particular scars will be of such a kind that there is “not *deformatas* in them, but *dignitas*” (22.19). If in the resurrection for eternal life God removes congenital disabilities that God created so competently, what is their purpose in the first place? Augustine regards disabilities as temporal embodied warnings of eternal corporeal punishment (21.8). As a concluding perspective, the alternative view of disabilities by the Apostle Paul will be considered.

KEYWORDS: *Augustine, disabilities, De civitate Dei, creation, theodicy, dignity*

1. Introduction

Augustine’s *De ciuitate Dei* (*ciu.*) 16.8 is the only extant theological treatise from the ancient Mediterranean world to discuss congenital physical disabilities in some detail, along with several important remarks on disabilities in books 19; 21–22¹ (Volp 2006, 313–14). Apart from certain New Testament texts, only Gregory of Nazianzus’s discussion of leprosy makes a comparable contribution (Gregory of Nazianzus 2006, 76–97; Caspary 2012, 24–64).² By contrast, in wider ancient Greco-Roman literature, people with disabilities are mentioned only very sporadically (Laes 2020a). In antiquity, there was no specific literary discourse devoted to people with disabilities, in keeping with the absence of a Latin or Greek word

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¹ As here, numbers without author and date refer to the book or book and chapter (separated by a period) in *ciu.*

² See also Chrysostom’s commentary on John 9: Chrysostom 2000, 85–96.

corresponding to the modern concept of disability. Even in *ciu.* disability plays only a supporting role in the topics of creation (16.8) and eschatology (21–22). Yet the discussion of disability in *ciu.* is significant in its own right, especially given Augustine’s formative power in the West.

The topic of disability is not commonly explored in Augustine’s studies,³ and when it is, there are often misunderstandings or significant omissions. Close readings of the relevant texts are offered only rarely. Scholars who discuss Augustine’s views on people with disabilities commonly make two main observations.⁴ Augustine asserts in *ciu.* that God is the good and competent creator of all people, whether disabled or not, whose works are beyond reproach. Elsewhere, Augustine also criticizes the exposure of newborn babies (2001, 430; 1998, 39). There he does not mention the aspect of disabilities, yet the practice harmed disabled and enslaved children disproportionately (Evans Grubbs 2013, 88–89). This takes place against a historical backdrop of widespread prejudice against people with nonstandard bodies in Roman antiquity. Sometimes they were killed shortly after birth, as were people with intersex characteristics (then called hermaphrodites) because they were considered bad omens—although customs became significantly less harsh after the Republic (Graumann 2013; Allély 2018, para. 10; and Husquin 2020) and it is possible that the frequency of infanticide has been overestimated (Sneed 2021). While people with nonstandard bodies who survived the first weeks of life were not typically confronted with open violence, it was not unusual for them to be abused, for example, in freak shows. Nevertheless, occasionally lives shine through the historical records of Greco-Roman antiquity that are more multifaceted than simply an experience of hostility.

The argument of this article is that Augustine’s view of people with disabilities is clearly more negative than scholars have so far suggested. To make this case, I am going to discuss *ciu.* 16.8; 21; and 22. First, four sections will deal with Augustine’s thought on people with disabilities with regard to creation, after which two sections will examine the way *ciu.* addresses disabilities and eschatology. I will begin (section 2) by discussing how Augustine thinks about disabilities in his theology of creation in 16.8. This chapter features prominently in the existing literature on Augustine and disabilities. Here, it has largely escaped commentators that when Augustine portrays people with disabilities in 16.8 as created by an absolutely competent and benevolent God, he discusses the theodicy question. Those “who cannot see the entirety” of God’s creation, due to creaturely limitations, “are offended by the apparent deformity of a part” (136:10–12).⁵ Augustine’s

³ For example, the 50+ volumes of *Augustinian Studies* and the 1100 entries of *Augustinus-Lexikon* do not contain specific contributions to the issue. O’Daly 2020 does not mention disabilities either. For an early discussion of Augustine on disabilities, see Stainton 2008.

⁴ Brock 2019, and chapter 1; Brock 2012; Gosbell 2016, 109; Volp 2006, 314–16; Kelley 2009, 199–225; Upson-Saia 2011; Laes 2013, 137.

⁵ As here, references to page and line in Augustine 1993b are given without author and date. Unless the citation refers to *ciu.* 16.8, book and chapter follow in brackets. All translations from *ciu.* are by A. M.

view of purposeful creation constitutes a positive aspect of his thought about disabilities, but this is part of a larger ambivalence. By the same token, Augustine asserts that we must take it on faith that God created people with disabilities on purpose as if the goodness of life with disabilities were beyond experience in principle.

The ensuing section explores how, in 16.8, Augustine discusses the world of creatures in dialogue with the primeval history of Genesis and the pagan traditions about the so-called Plinian races, legendary tribes with highly distinct anatomies, which he subsumes, together with people with physical disabilities, under the category of the “monstrous.” This chapter has its obscure aspects, which contrast with its significance in discussions of Augustine’s understanding of disabilities. Expositors conjecture that Augustine’s implicit motivation in suggesting the Adamitic descent of the Plinians is to assert their need of Christ (Yates 2021, 197). Yet Augustine’s discussion of whether the Plinians are descendants of Noah, or of Adam but not of Noah (135:7–9), is irrelevant for that. Moreover, commentators are unaware of the concept of spontaneous generation, which explains the continuing existence of the Plinians. Their Adamitic, non-Noahite lineage re-emerged after the flood because they come into being without being born to parents. One important point for disability theology is that Augustine considers rationality the criterion of human status among the Plinian races, as indicated by language. Augustine does not see the need to defend the humanity of people with disabilities, whom he regards as human as a matter of course—in contrast to certain Plinians.

The fourth section asks in what sense Augustine considers people with disabilities *mirabiles* (136:4.22). This has on occasion been understood in a positive sense, meaning *wonderful*. First and foremost, however, Augustine calls phenomena *mirabiles* that are unusual, deviating from the ordinary course of nature. If *mirabilis* is understood specifically as a term of appreciation, we fail to see how Augustine reifies the category of disabilities.

Further, Augustine’s conviction that people with disabilities are created by an absolutely competent God is often taken to imply that he attributes full human dignity to people with disabilities. After all, Augustine has no doubt that people with disabilities are fully human. Concluding the part on disabilities and creation in Augustine’s thought, in the fifth section I ask how Augustine understands human dignity in *ciu.*, in discussing book 22. Here lies the reason for the fact that in 16.8, disabilities raise the theodicy question for Augustine. While Augustine otherwise attributes human dignity specifically to the human soul, it is only consistent that in a work on citizenship and politics—on the social realm of rational embodied mortals—Augustine pays particular attention also to the human body, discussing the dignity of the ensouled body. He locates human dignity specifically in the interplay of the body’s rationality and beauty. With these created properties, the ensouled body shows that it is destined for heaven. However, Augustine gives several examples of how, in his eyes, disabilities reduce these dimensions. The

implication is that human dignity can be attributed to people with disabilities only to a reduced extent.

With Augustine's idea that the created characteristics of physical beauty and embodied rationality find their fulfillment in heaven, the fifth section transitions to analyses of disabilities and eschatology in *ciu*. How do disabilities figure in Augustine's understanding of the resurrection? Commentators have repeatedly noted with critical reserve that *ciu*. envisions the saints being healed from all disabilities in the resurrection. Moreover, for Augustine, in the resurrection, the martyrs will perhaps feature scars where their limbs were mutilated by their persecutors. This proposal is the topic of section 6. The suggestion has been made that, while general healing of disabilities is a problem for those affirming disabilities as part of their identity, the preservation of scars nevertheless vouches *pars pro toto* for a certain respect for people with disabilities on the whole. However, I will argue that the possibility of the martyrs' scars in the resurrection is not inclusive of, but contrasts with other disabilities: in the martyrs' scars, specifically, "there will not be *deformitas*, but *dignitas*" (599:25–26 [22.19]).

If disabilities offend unaided experience (section 2) but are left behind in the resurrection (section 6), for what reason did God include them in the grand scheme of creation and redemption in the first place? Section 7 explores how in 21.8, Augustine defends the expectation of eternal bodily punishment in hell against pagan critics. For that purpose, he draws on the old pagan belief that people with congenital disabilities or with intersex characteristics are bad omens. For Augustine, God sends a message by creating people with disabilities. Commentators have suggested that Augustine understands this message as an affirming word. However, whatever judgment people with disabilities will receive for themselves, Augustine sees disabilities as a warning that God gives to the *civitas terrena*. Finally, in a concluding outlook, I will provide a point of comparison to Augustine's interpretation of disabilities by interpreting the view the Apostle Paul took of his own disability.

2. Taking the Goodness of Life with Disabilities Merely on Faith?

In the current theological discourse on disability, Brian Brock has developed his thought in dialogue with Augustine's explicit views on the issue. A key point in Brock's own theological account of disability was made by Augustine, which is the simple yet powerful insistence that the omnipotent God created people with disabilities on purpose (Brock 2019, chap. 1; Brock 2012). Augustine writes, "God is the creator of all things . . . knowing the beauty of the whole, whose parts God composes either in similarity or in diversity" (136:7–10).⁶ Augustine's assertion that people with disabilities are God's good creatures is part of Augustine's doctrine of creation: disabilities are not missteps by a

⁶ See also Brock 2019, 16.

bumbling demiurge or the work of demons. Likewise, for church historian Ulrich Volp, Augustine implicitly attributes fundamental human dignity to people with disabilities (Volp 2006, 314). Yet in what sense precisely does Augustine affirm life with disabilities?

After Augustine's claim that people with disabilities were intentionally created that way by God, he adds immediately that this is not obvious, but must be asserted in the face of contrary appearances: "those who cannot see the entirety [of creation] are offended by the apparent deformity (*deformatate*) of a part; after all, they do not know with what it goes together and to what it refers" (136:10–12). For Augustine, the intentional, good creation of people with disabilities, or "deformities," is the confidence of faith. Yet it seems natural to Augustine that that is in tension with the testimony of experience: as creatures with a limited perspective, we cannot experience the comprehensive perspective that would justify the creation of disabilities. Augustine does not ask how people with disabilities see their own lives, nor does he encourage people to discover the goodness of life with disabilities on the level of experience. Augustine's creation theology is not simply a positive evaluation of people with disabilities, but at the same time asserts a negative aspect.

Augustine's remark about the "entirety" of creation and an individual "part" hearkens to his discussion of the theodicy question earlier in *ciu.* and elsewhere (1991, 160–61; 1953, 264 [xl.76]). He suggests earlier in *ciu.* 12.4 that we "do not take pleasure" in various individual parts of creation because, as limited elements of the wider whole, we cannot see how appropriate they are to the beauty of the entire created order. If we were able to see things from a holistic perspective—which only God does—those "particular aspects which offend us (*offendunt*)" would lose their sting (1993a, 516:29–517:1 [12.4]). In 12.4, Augustine's discussion of the theodicy question suggests that the biblical plagues that tormented the Egyptians were ultimately good, although they were experienced as bad (1993a, 517:12–14). In 16.8, Augustine redeploys this part-whole theodicy. Now it is not the Egyptian plagues but disabilities that create the need to explain in what sense a certain aspect of reality is good after all. The person who is "offended (*offenditur*) by the apparent deformity of a part" is misled, naturally enough, because they cannot see the "beauty of the whole" (136:9–12). The negative experience of disabilities is relativized by the positive contribution they make to the whole of creation, which is good. However, there is a barb in Augustine's creation statement about disabilities. The whole is beyond the experience of the limited creature, and what Augustine achieves, other than to assert the ultimate goodness of disabilities, which is beyond experience, is to cement the implicit idea that disabilities, insofar as we have any experience of them, are not good. That is why, for Augustine, the defense of the creator is required in the first place.

How does this view of disabilities fit with what is known about the situation of people with disabilities in Roman antiquity? Roughly two centuries before Augustine wrote *ciu.*, Roman jurists debated whether children born with

disabilities should count among the three children for whom the Roman *ius trium liberorum* rewarded free Roman parents. Answering positively, the jurist Ulpian argued that parents bear no personal responsibility for their child's disability (Husquin 2020, sect. 4.2). Such a sentiment reflects the Roman appreciation of the strong, self-sufficient body. This contrasts with the fact that, in his wider ecclesial responsibilities, Augustine brings caring attention to human frailty and impairments, with energetic, practical advocacy for people with physical afflictions (Claes and Dupont 2016, 338). Here, Augustine differs from the simple vilification that people with disabilities may well have experienced (Brock 2019, 16–17). In classic antiquity, people with disabilities and their parents were sometimes exposed to blatant mockery and comments that we would find hurtful today (Laes 2013, 133). In addition, there is also the practical aspect of disabilities: in the ancient world, life with disabilities presented hardships in the absence of a public social safety net or technologies like wheelchairs.

However, it is by no means clear that in antiquity, people with disabilities fundamentally questioned the goodness of their lives. Having a disability did not automatically preclude economically productive work and marriage (Edwards 1997, 38; Laes 2013, 137). Some people with disabilities also found economic security by entering monasteries (Laes 2013, 138). While the welfare state is a later development, extended families practiced a degree of solidarity that is less common today (Edwards 1997, 41). The poet Horace, moreover, saw “disability names” as a way in which ordinary parents expressed their fondness for their children with disabilities (1999, 204–5; Grassl 1986, 121). There were even Roman citizens with impairments who held high offices, not least the emperors Claudius, Septimius Severus, Maxentius, and Constans, who all had pronounced mobility impairments, partly in addition to further intellectual or physical impairments (Grassl 1986, 120; Laes 2013, 131–32).

Today, people without disabilities tend to rate disabilities clearly more negatively than do those with disabilities, who report high levels of life satisfaction (Shakespeare 2014, 81). Although life with disabilities can involve genuine struggles, the idea that disabilities simply eclipse the experience of life's goodness ignores the fact that people quite naturally claim their lives as theirs, affirming their identities, of which disabilities are a part (Schramme 2013). This is natural enough since they do not know life any differently, and it stands to reason that this aspect of psychology has not changed over the millennia. Already in antiquity, disability was presumably too diverse a phenomenon for a blanket portrayal as a hardship that would, in subjective experience, simply eclipse the goodness of creation. Describing a form of sign language (1968, 13), Augustine was aware of how people with disabilities adapt to their situation, perhaps by learning new skills that nondisabled people do not need. Presumably, disabled persons further accommodated and coped then, as they do now, by acknowledging that the value of certain activities they can do is socially underrated, and by adjusting their expectations in other areas (Shakespeare 2013, 97–100). Augustine's evaluation of disabilities was as limited in his day as that of people

today who have no disabilities and fundamentally question the quality of life with disabilities.

Perhaps this account is anachronistic to the extent that it judges Augustine by the fact that, today, disability studies are aware of the perspectives of people with disabilities. Should that be the case, greater care is required nevertheless in the description of Augustine's thought, and here commentators should be more aware of the negative implications of Augustine's argument about creation. They have noted that elsewhere, Augustine views disabilities partly as a deficit, even if they note positive aspects in his evaluation of disabilities. They contrast this fact with Augustine's statement about God's absolute competence as a creator. For Brock, for example, Augustine's argument about the competence of the creator implies exclusively the goodness of people with disabilities, in contrast to *other* statements by Augustine with negative implications about disabilities. However, Brock does not comment on the theological argument about the entirety of creation in Augustine's statement about God's competence as creator, compared to isolated aspects of creation (Brock 2019, 16, 2012, 88). The connection between Augustine's creation statement in 16.8 and his part-whole theodicy, in 12.4 and elsewhere, goes unacknowledged. Most commentators do not see that Augustine's creation statement in 16.8 is a strategy in theodicy,⁷ which is not simply positive in its implications. When commentators interpret Augustine's creation statement to say that in principle, all human lives, including those with disabilities, are good the way they are (Brock 2019, 16), they do not follow up with the question about the level on which Augustine thinks that that statement applies and on which it does not. It is misleading, then, to suggest without clear qualifications that in 16.8, Augustine appreciates diversity in creation (*pace* Kelley 2009). In a specific sense, Augustine does affirm the *diversitas* (136:10) of creation, calling disabilities God's good, intentional work. However, Augustine implies that on the level of experience, the goodness of disabilities remains hidden; in contrast to the assertion of faith, on the level of subjective experience, disabilities are not the work of a good creator for him.

3. Are the Plinian Races Human?

As Augustine comments on people with disabilities in 16.8, he understands them in a certain analogy with a group of curious creatures. In the paradoxographical tradition, ancient writers, especially Pliny the Elder, give a "curious and wondrous account" (*curiosa et mirabilis historia*, 136:21–22) of groups of creatures in far-off countries, the so-called Plinian races: cyclopes, people without mouths, with one leg, some who combine human features with a dog's head and who bark, as well as four other extraordinary groups. It is a propos the

⁷ Only Volp 2006, 315, and Sohn 2007, 50–51, note the point. They do not discuss the implications for people with disabilities.

extraordinary anatomies of the Plinians that Augustine also discusses people with disabilities. The two are different groups.⁸

The reason Augustine discusses these legendary creatures in the first place, and people with disabilities as a consequence, is that in 15–18, he surveys the city of God in its historical totality. This history initially unfolded in the original creation, descent from Adam, the flood, and descent from Noah's family. Noah's descendants are humanity proper; they constitute the *civitas Dei* and the *civitas terrena*. Now Augustine's question is whether the Plinian races constitute yet another lineage descending from Noah; whether they are descendants of Adam but not of Noah; or whether they are outside of Adam's lineage, which would make them nonhuman. A propos of the unusual anatomy of the Plinian races—or "certain monstrous races of humans"—Augustine also addresses people with disabilities, or "the monstrous ones born among us humans" (136:5–7).

Augustine calls people with disabilities *monstra* like the Plinians. In the absence of a word similar to our concept of disability, the Latin usage of the word *monstrum* was presumably less harsh than today's *monster*, but still carried a stigma (Gevaert and Laes 2013, 213; Laes 2020a, 1. 10–11). Commentators highlight Augustine's point that nothing that the senses perceive can cast doubt upon the humanity of people with disabilities. They also suggest that Augustine defines humanity not by capacities or qualities, but by descent from human parents (Brock 2019, 16). However, although Augustine considers anyone born to human parents human, it is not clear if he defines humans by descent. He is primarily interested in whether the Plinian races are human, and he is doubtful in one particular case.

Augustine's natural history of early humanity runs broadly like this: if the Plinian races were descendants of Noah, the common human branch would have split into various kinds that would be markedly different. Yet it seems more plausible to him that the Plinians emerged before, not after the flood. Genesis 6 indicates to him that there were antediluvian giants, who were descendants of Adam (109:30–110:3 [15.23]). They provide the template for Augustine's understanding of the Plinians. He allows for an exception to the constancy of species where Scripture appears to warrant such a step.⁹

Nevertheless, to Augustine, the Plinian races appear to exist still. If the Plinians are descendants of Adam but not of Noah, how have their lineages survived the flood? The current existence of Plinians implies that they come into existence through spontaneous generation and not through conception and birth, for any biological parents of theirs would have perished in the flood. In 16.7 (134:27–135:3), Augustine suggests that animals on highly remote islands may not be descendants of those rescued in Noah's Ark; instead, they probably came into existence through spontaneous generation, as Augustine

⁸ Pace O'Daly 2020, 201.

⁹ On the emergence of new kinds, see also Augustine 2002a, 394–95.

thinks Genesis 1:24 also claims was the case for the first terrestrial animals (see footnote 8). It seems to Augustine that after the flood, in some regions, sexual mammals “emerged” not from their mothers’ bodies, but “from the earth” (134:28 [16.7]), as he assumes frogs do everywhere. Likewise, the bodies of the Plinians are not physically derived from the bodies of parents, although they are descendants of Adam. Up to Charles Darwin’s times, spontaneous generation was a respectable biological concept (Bowler 2009, 79–84). In 16.7, then, Augustine prepares the ground for his argument about the Plinians. He distinguishes the “monstrous” legendary creatures, whom God may have “wanted to create in such a way,” namely through spontaneous generation, from “monstrous” people with disabilities, “who among us need to be born from humans” (137:18–20 [16.8]).

A specific case raises another question. “What am I to say of the *cynocephali*, whose dog heads and actual barking show they are more beasts than human?” Augustine answers: “it is not necessary to believe that all genera of humans are what they are called” (135:25–29).¹⁰ He goes on to suggest that at least some of the legendary creatures may not be human (“*homines non sunt*”; “*si homines sunt*,” 137:28–29). Commentators, by contrast, understand the previous sentence differently, with almost all published English translations: “it is not necessary to believe in all genera of humans that are said to exist.”¹¹ Yet if reports of strange creatures are largely plausible and Augustine believes that certain people can sing through their anus (51:11–13 [14.24]), then there is no need to doubt the existence of a dog-headed, human-like creature. Moreover, if *cynocephali* appear “more like nonhuman animals (*bestias*) than humans” (135:27), a comment about their nature, not their existence should follow.

For Augustine, it seems to be less the dog heads of the *cynocephali* than their lack of language, their “very barking,” emphasized with an extra pronoun (*ipse latratus*, 135:25–27), that places their humanity in question. Just before 16.8, Augustine argued that God addresses both mortal humans and immortal angels in language, if in different kinds, while nonhuman animals lack language altogether, and thus rationality, “Unchangeable Truth” either speaks to rational minds ineffably, as to the angels or in verbal language, as to humans (133:16–20 [16.6]). Language is an implicit part of Augustine’s definition of humans as rational mortals, which he mentions twice in 16.8.

Concerning humans with disabilities, Augustine continues, there is no reason to doubt that they are descendants of Adam, regardless of appearance. That leaves open the question of whether the Plinian races, who come into existence through spontaneous generation, are human. Their humanity depends on whether they are “rational mortal animals” (135:30, 137:9–10).

¹⁰ See Augustine 1952, 502. “Sed omnia genera hominum quae dicuntur esse credere non est necesse.”

¹¹ See notably John Healey’s 1610 translation (Augustine 1909, 96).

For Augustine, people with disabilities are certainly human; their human status is not in question in the first place. He calls them “born among us” (135:29–136:6), yet his intention in doing so is not to assert descent from humans as the criterion of humanity but to distinguish them from the Plinian races. Birth to human parents is not ultimately Augustine’s criterion of humanity,¹² for by and large the Plinians are also human. Commentators miss this fact because they are unaware of the role that spontaneous generation plays in Augustine’s argument.¹³

Does this question of criteria imply the possibility that people with disabilities are not human, based on intellectual criteria? That has been an extremely troubling matter since the Nazis denounced people with disabilities as subhuman. Brock valiantly enlists Augustine’s support in disputing such a way of thinking.¹⁴ However, Augustine uses rationality as a criterion in evaluating whether the Plinians are human, although he does not examine the human status of people with disabilities. *Cynocephali* are nonrational because they lack language. Apparently, that is part of their nature as canines. Concerning people with disabilities, by contrast, Augustine discusses physical, not intellectual disabilities in *ciu*. Elsewhere, Augustine describes people with intellectual disabilities in other ways, referring to them in part by the “vulgar” term *moriones* (Stainton 2008, 490), but not by the term *monstra*. Augustine does not evaluate the human status of people with disabilities in *ciu*, because the rationality of conjoined twins, for example, does not require discussion. To defend it would suggest that there is a *prima facie* case for its negation.

Augustine does suggest, however, that the human status of people with disabilities is not cast in doubt by any differences in “shape, color, motion, sound,” in “natural power or part or quality” (135:31–136:2). Does he defend the human status of people with disabilities after all? No, here Augustine aims at two things. The human status of people with physical disabilities does not depend on individual sensory data, but on their rationality, which is not in question. Further, the Plinians cannot be excluded from humanity based on individual, empirical sensory data, either. Neither can apes or monkeys, Augustine suggests (137:13–14). Just like *cynocephali*, they are not human because they lack reason.

If all who are born to human parents are rational, how does descent relate to rationality in evaluating human status? For Augustine, birth to human parents is only part of the *extension* of the concept of humanity—part of the circumstances under which the true criterion of humanity applies. Augustine sees the *intension* of the term, which constitutes the concept of humanity, in human rationality. In this sense, Augustine speaks of “anyone born to human parents, that is, as a rational mortal animal” (125:29–30). No one born to human parents lacks human rationality. A further extension of the concept of humanity

¹² Pace Brock 2012, 72.

¹³ See for example O’Daly 2020, 201.

¹⁴ See Brock 2012, 71.

consists of several Plinian lineages, who are largely human but have not been born. The crucial case, however, are the *cynocephali*, who fall short of human rationality.

In what sense people with intellectual disabilities are rational souls is a question Augustine does not consider relevant in *ciu.*, yet his emphasis on rationality may lend plausibility to the question. Possibly he addresses the point in a discussion of human rationality in *De Trinitate* (2002b, 142 [14.4.6]).¹⁵ At any rate, based on *ciu.*, he would not answer that question with the fact of human descent, and commentators are insufficiently aware that in *ciu.*, Augustine also makes use of the logic of exclusion based on rationality, although not among people with disabilities.

4. *Mirabilia* and the Reification of Disabilities

In 16.8, Augustine designates people with congenital impairments as *mirabiles*, using a word scholars chose when unable to account for the strangeness of certain phenomena. Augustine is primarily interested in “certain monstrous genera of people,” the Plinian races. Here, Augustine also uses the term *mirabilis*, wondrous. It is a traditional expression in the partly sensationalist, partly more respectable and intellectual tradition of paradoxography, for example in the pseudo-Aristotelian *De mirabilibus auscultationibus*. It meant something perplexing, whether positive or not. Augustine can also call terrifying natural phenomena in the inanimate world *mirabiles* (507:2–4 [21.8]). However, commentators sometimes suggest that Augustine’s designation of the Plinians and of people with disabilities as *mirabilia*, “wonders,” is decidedly positive (Brock 2019, 17–18), without a detailed argument about Augustine’s text.

One thing that is *mirabilis* about the Plinian races is their highly unusual anatomy. Augustine knows nonstandard anatomical features from people with disabilities. However, the Plinian races constitute *genera*, tribes, *gentes*, nations, or clans. For Augustine, strange features that deviate from the known human anatomy, yet which are consistent within stable human collectives, clearly add to the extraordinary (*mirabilis*) nature of the Plinians. By contrast, for Augustine regular people with disabilities are not part of a disabled *genus* or *gens*, an entire group that would stand out with consistent features across generations. They are *mirabiles* as one-off exceptions to the general constancy of species in natural history; they deviate from the biological “conformation” of the offspring to the parental type (611:9–11 [22.24]), which Augustine names as the “original good” preserved after the Fall, together with biological reproduction.

Whether unusual anatomies appear in collectives or only in individuals, *mirabilia* are a matter of statistics: “it is evident, however, what is the case by nature for the most part”—the standard anatomy—“and what is wondrous (*mirabilis*) in its very rarity”—the Plinian races and persons with disabilities (136:3–4). That does

¹⁵ See Brock 2012, 72.

not mean that Augustine understands unusual anatomies as unnatural, for nature itself is a “permanent miracle” in Augustine’s eyes (Roessli 2012, 25).

Just as the Plinians are “wondrous,” so two conjoined twins attracted gawkers from far away, as Augustine recounts (136:31–137:3). A “wondrous” crowd of on-lookers followed a woman of extraordinary height around Rome (109:14–17 [15,23]). Augustine reports such voyeurism without any moral disapproval. On the other hand, it seems remarkably nonchalant that Augustine calls polydactyly—having more than five fingers or toes on a hand or foot—“lighter than any difference” (136:14), compared to other disabilities. Is polydactyly just part of the natural range of diversity, so that on the whole, calling a person *mirabilis* implies no “othering”?

For Augustine, polydactyly is a condition of the “monstrous ones born among us humans.” He goes on to spell out his argument: first, even regarding something as “light” as polydactyly, the creator did not make a mistake. Second, if this minor deviation is by design, then *a fortiori* we cannot assume that the creator made mistakes with more obvious divergences like conjoined twins. The *a-fortiori* logic requires that polydactyly is a monstrosity. The discussion of polydactyly shores up and reifies the concept of disability, preserving it over against an embrace of eleven fingers as a form of regular human diversity. A particular kind of physical difference is part of the reified category of disability, regardless of how “light” it is.

To embrace diversity without the concept of disability would not have been anachronistic, however. For example, Augustine is astounded at people who can produce musical sounds at will from their anus or sweat when they choose (51:11–14 [14.24]). Exactly like people with disabilities, he calls these people “wondrous (*mirabiles*) in their very rarity” (50:23 [14.24]; 136:4 [16.8]). Notably, he does not call them monstrous. By contrast, something minor as having an eleventh toe does not count as part of the ordinary human bodily variation.

Among the various “wondrous” people, only the Plinians and those with disabilities are “monstrous.” Among the “monstrous,” however, only people with disabilities raise the theodicy question for Augustine. The reason God created the Plinians seems to be, Augustine suggests in the conclusion, that God wanted to allay doubts as to whether an absolutely competent God created people with disabilities on purpose. Yet Augustine does not suggest that people with disabilities might likewise allay doubts regarding the intentional, competent creation of the Plinians (137:17–22). *Mirabilia* can be positive, yet for Augustine, those who are *mirabilis* due to disabilities cannot shake off the implication of the freakish or the deficient.

5. Augustine on the Dignity of People with Disabilities

What are the practical implications of Augustine’s statement that people with disabilities are intentionally created as parts of a whole that is good? Theologians tend to associate the purposeful creation of all humans by a good and competent God with creation in the image of God.¹⁶ That is often taken to

¹⁶ On Augustine’s developing understanding of this term and the connection with human dignity, see Puffer 2017.

constitute human dignity and implies the practical dimension of respect or appreciation. However, analyses of Augustine's understanding of *dignitas* have hardly drawn at all on the specific contribution that *ciu.* makes.¹⁷ Brock, who discusses *ciu.*, rarely uses the term *dignity*,¹⁸ preferring more distinctively theological notions like creation and sin, while in wider society, dignity is sometimes reduced to the necessity to respect autonomy (Macklin 2003). To the contrary, when Volp comments on Augustine's statement that people with disabilities were created on purpose (16.8), he takes for granted a connection between creation, the image of God, and human dignity, understanding dignity as an all-or-nothing concept. In 16.8, however, Augustine does not mention the *imago* and dignity.

In another statement that does not address disabilities, *ciu.* affirms that with the rationality of the human soul, people are made in the image of God (611:9 [22.24]). In other works, Augustine likewise sees *dignitas* rooted specifically in the way God created the rational soul,¹⁹ but there he does not reflect on disabilities again.²⁰ In the context of disabilities and dignity, I am less interested in the question of whether intellectual disabilities might compromise the rationality of the human soul, which is not at issue in *ciu.* How does Augustine think about disabilities and dignity in *ciu.* more generally?

In *ciu.*, Augustine disputes the traditional Roman view that power resting on achievements in battle increases dignity (1993a, 222:19–20 [5.17]; Ober 2014). But the specific contribution of *ciu.* to Augustine's understanding of *dignitas* lies in Augustine's reflection on disabilities and on the way they relate not simply to the dignity of the soul, but to the dignity of the ensouled body. Augustine addresses this topic specifically in *ciu.* 22.24. The human body reflects the “goodness of God,” its creator (613:29). Augustine lists many good things that ennoble temporal life, both in terms of the makeup of the body and its capabilities. The human body is itself rational and functional, “made for service to the rational soul” (611:9). The body's erect posture directs the view toward the heavens (*caelum*), reminding people to “ponder the higher things” (613:35–614:1), and likewise, the human body is suited for rational activities like speaking, writing, and various arts and crafts. The “body is thus tied to the kind of soul that it serves” (614:5).²¹

Further, when discussing *dignitas* in *ciu.*, Augustine attaches special importance to beauty, *decus*. For Augustine, the human body combines rationality with beauty and practical utility—the true, the beautiful, and, in a certain sense, the good. Apart from the aspect of dignity, scholars have pointed out the “priority”

¹⁷ Gärtner 2002 compiles insights from various works, not addressing disabilities. See further Volp 2006, 236–40.

¹⁸ In Brock 2012, 2019, the term hardly occurs at all.

¹⁹ Gärtner 2002, 432–33. See *ciu.* 22, 24 on the connection between reason and the *imago Dei*. Volp 2006, 234–40. Further, see Kent 2017.

²⁰ On illness and dignity, see Volp 2006, 239.

²¹ See Volp 2006, 233–34.

Augustine's discussion of redemption assigns to "beauty" (Hunter 2021). The close relationship between dignity and beauty, moreover, follows the close etymological relationship between *dignus* (worthy) and *decus* (beauty).²² Augustine can even use *dignity* and *beauty* synonymously. First, he asks whether, in the creation of the body, "the consideration given to usefulness (*utilitas*) was greater than that given to beauty (*decus*)" (614:8–9 [22.24]). Second, he reasons that no bodily function is without beauty (*decus*), and sometimes there is even beauty (*decus*) without any practical use (*usus*; 614:9–11 [22.24]). Beards and male nipples are purely ornamental, for example. Third, the conclusion to the question about beauty is phrased in terms of dignity: the body "highlights *dignitas* even more than necessity (*necessitas*)" (615:2–7 [22.24]).

This is only appropriate if in heaven there will no longer be any bodily needs: the ultimate purpose of the body is reflected more in its beauty than its practical use. The beauty of the redeemed bodies will even be analogous to God's own (615:11 [22.24]). Reflecting something of the divine, however indirectly, the standard, nondisabled body is theologically charged for Augustine. The embodied beauty and rationality of the human creature indicate that the creator intended humans for eternal redemption, where the body's beauty and rationality will find their fulfillment. While pagans see dignity grounded in heroic achievements, Augustine's wider understanding of dignity does not exclude those without achievements, rooting dignity instead in the fact that the standard human body is beautiful and serves the rational soul.

However, while embodied rationality and beauty imply dignity, Augustine views *deformitas* as a deficit (Upson-Saia 2011, 100). A scrawny figure or obesity distorts a person's bodily proportions, for example (598:22–23 [22.19]). In heaven, people's height will be adjusted to ideal measures (588:18–22 [22.12]), which implies the elimination of dwarfism and the gigantism Augustine mentions elsewhere (109:14–16 [15.23]). A missing limb violates the principle of *congruentia*, symmetry, which constitutes the body's beauty together with its complexion (598:24–28 [22.19]; 614:6–9 [22.24]). By implication, polydactyly (16.8) also compromises *congruentia*. Further, Augustine is perturbed by a curved spine that "turns a person into a quadruped," "ruining all the splendor and beauty" of the erect human posture (357:12–13 [19.4]). Blindness, muteness, and deafness compromise the chances of a happy life severely (359:29 [19.4]). "Deformity defeats beauty," and impairments "undermine all grace and beauty (*decus*) of the body" (357:5–6.14–15 [19.4]). Physical disabilities are appropriate only for "this wretched life," indicating its "penal condition" (598:5.17 [22.19]).

This is the reason why in 16.8, disabilities raised the theodicy question for Augustine: if dignity consists in the unity of embodied rationality and beauty, along with utility, physical disabilities reduce human dignity. If the embodied rationality, beauty, and utility of the standard human body contributed to dignity in analogy to God's beauty, toward whom the rational mind is directed, we would question how

²² Dürig 1957, 1024 ("decnus").

“the deformity of a part” is “adapted or related to the whole” of creation (16.8); disabilities would render the human directedness toward God less clear.

However, Augustine has no doubt that people with disabilities are human; as such do they not share in human dignity? They do, but human *dignitas* is not necessarily an all-or-nothing concept for Augustine. Elsewhere, Augustine suggests that people display different degrees of *dignitas* in heaven (Gärtner 2002, 430).²³ Certainly the *dignitas* of disabled people places them above animals. Yet enslaved people further illustrate gradations in *dignitas*: it is against a slave's *dignitas* to be valued less than a horse (1993a, 484:5–6 [11.16]), but apparently it is not against a slave's *dignitas* to be enslaved, for imperial conquest and enslavement carry out God's judgment on the nations (381:22–23, 29–30; 383:1–11 [19.15–16]). It is only consistent, then, to say that in *ciu.*, physical disabilities reduce the *dignitas* of the ensouled body. They do not take it away entirely, but the parallel to slavery suggests that they do more harm than to eclipse merely the expression of dignity. For that reason, Augustine can also contrast *deformatas* and *dignitas* directly (599:25–26 [22.19], see below). The *dignitas* of the ensouled body does not always demand the same full respect on par with that owed to a free, nondisabled Roman male.

While Augustine does not argue for treating people with disabilities with less respect in *ciu.*, he nevertheless connects a person's *dignitas* closely to a normative anatomy (book 22) and implies that it is only natural that disabilities appear undesirable (16.8). If, against this backdrop, the characterization of people with disabilities as creatures of an absolutely competent God is Augustine's countervailing case for decent treatment, it is a haphazard one. For Augustine, belief in the one good, competent creator does not categorically rule out treating certain people as second- or third-class persons. Belief in God's good creation ruled out the exposure of newborns for Augustine, but beyond that we do not know whether he wanted people with disabilities to be treated better than they traditionally were in Roman culture.²⁴ Further, although troubling, it is not theoretically inconsistent to attribute reduced dignity to a person with disabilities and still to consider them purposefully created by an infallible God. The question arises, then, with what purpose God might have created people with disabilities according to Augustine. First, however, I will discuss Augustine's argument that disabilities do not render belief in eternal happiness (*beatitudo*) absurd.

6. Augustine on the Eschatological Removal of Disabilities

Augustine is in a theological dialogue with pagan opponents on “deformities and defects, whether accidental or congenital,” and their significance for

²³ See Augustine 1845: “But the many dwelling places signify the diverse degrees of dignity [*diversas dignitates*] regarding merits in the one eternal life.”

²⁴ Augustine 1997d, 73 (1.66) appears to criticize the buying of slaves with intellectual disabilities for entertainment purposes.

eschatology. For his opponents, deformities are a reason to doubt eternal bodily salvation on the whole (589:21–25 [22.12]). Augustine does not dispute a clear tension between disabilities and eternal salvation. However, he seeks to resolve the difficulty not by rejecting the bodily resurrection, but by suggesting that disabilities will be removed from the risen body. For Augustine, disabilities undermine the pagan pursuit of happiness in this life; in heaven, however, they will not get in the way of *beatitudo* (361:25–27; 362:6–8 [19.4]). Augustine claims that “the unusual and monstrous” deformities will be taken away (598:6–7 [22.19]; likewise 22.12; 22.20; and Upson-Saia 2011). The severed limbs of the martyrs will be restituted. However—“perhaps,” “if this will be fitting” (599:25.31 [22.19])—the restituted limbs of the martyrs will feature abiding scars, which announce their Christian steadfastness.

Several commentators suggest that people with disabilities may affirm their disabilities and not want them removed.²⁵ Kristi Upson-Saia comments that, from an Augustinian stance, Christians with disabilities may see their identities, including disabilities, affirmed rather than erased due to a perceived tension in Augustine’s thought, who “contends” that the martyrs would retain scars.²⁶ She assumes that in 16.8, Augustine ascribes “beauty” to disabilities in temporal life, which she sees confirmed in heavenly scars, which she then interprets as contradicting Augustine’s “evaluation of the repulsiveness of heavenly deformities” (Upson-Saia 2011, 116n42). However, rather than attribute beauty to disabilities themselves in 16.8, Augustine suggests that disabilities require justification; God creates disabilities on purpose, but the way they contribute to the beauty of the entirety of creation eludes limited creatures like us.

Candida Moss uses more explosive terminology: had Augustine not argued that in heaven certain scars abide, the healing he envisions “would amount to nothing other than a kind of heavenly eugenics” (Moss 2017, 51). Nancy Eiesland, while not in dialogue with Augustine, even suggests that God’s self is disabled. She bolsters this view with the narrative of the risen Christ displaying his violated limbs to his disciples (Luke 24:39; Eiesland 1994, 100). In *ciu.*, Augustine likewise invokes the narrative of the risen Christ presenting the marks of his wounds to his disciples, in John 20:24–29 (589:25–28 [22.12]).

The meaning of the “marks” of the risen Christ in John 20:25 (the “*typos* of the nails”) is at the heart of a scholarly debate. Moss argues that John’s *marks* means scars, whose persistence guards against a “heavenly eugenics.” Maja Whitaker, who understands *marks* as open wounds, suggests that an interpretation as scars would downplay the abiding eschatological significance of human trauma and disability, even if wounds no longer cause suffering in heaven.²⁷ The

²⁵ Brock 2019, 30; Whitaker 2021; Yong 2011, 132–36 (not in dialogue with Augustine). Gould 2016 sides with Augustine. See Gosbell 2021 on the debate.

²⁶ Upson-Saia 2011, 104, 110.

²⁷ Whitaker 2021, 12, who does not make a significant distinction between disability and injury (see p. 9) and does not conceive of disability positively as an identity marker.

embrace of abiding vulnerability is a crucial aspect at stake in the discussion of Jesus's marks from a disabilities perspective. Both Moss and Whitaker comment on Augustine. His term for Christ's marks, *loci vulnerum*, *places of the wounds* (589:27 [22.12]), is as ambivalent as *marks*.²⁸ However, attention to the question moves our understanding of Augustine's views about disabilities forward.

Augustine discusses Christ's marks in John 20:25 as a potential rebuttal of his claim that "deformities" will be taken away in the resurrection (589:25–28 [22.12]). If Augustine had interpreted these marks as scars, they would have been signs of eschatological healing, thus bolstering both the aspects of healing and of potential scars in his view of the resurrection. However, Augustine envisions Jesus's marks as open wounds, notably forgoing the opportunity to support his account further. In contrast to Jesus's "places of the wounds," Augustine explicitly speaks of the martyrs' "scars" (599:22–600:3 [22.19]). Yet why have Jesus's wounds not healed, in a process of scarring, as Augustine's theory of heavenly healing would suggest?

For Augustine, the risen Christ has wounds if and when they serve his own practical purposes. Christ merely required some practical device by which the disciples, blind to his heavenly glory, would recognize him (599:7–9 [22.19]). Like a symbol that is all about its referent and carries no significance apart from that, the marks are not themselves part of Christ's identity but indicate something else about Christ. Likewise, the reason that the risen Christ drank and ate (Luke 24:43) is not—Augustine explains in the same breath—that in human vulnerability he depended on continued nourishment. Rather, he merely ate because he had the power to do so (599:9–12 [22.19]). To eat is something very different for the risen Christ than for ordinary humans. Christ has wounds in the same way that he eats. For identification purposes, he displays wounds, *vulnera*, but he is not vulnerable.

Augustine would dispute Eiesland's view of the "disabled God." Neither do the risen saints suffer any lack according to Augustine. So even if they have scars, that does not mean they embrace their human vulnerability, as today's commentators envision people with disabilities doing. Augustine suggests that ordinarily, scars are defects or blemishes (*vitia*—also: *vices*), yet in their moral testimony, the hypothetical scars of the martyrs display the "beauty of virtue" that is "in the body, but not of the body." Like Christ's marks, they are merely symbols, but not of vulnerability. "There will not be *deformatas*, but *dignitas* in them" (599:25–26 [22.19]). By contrast, disabilities that are congenital or due to accidents do not symbolize any achievement. Augustine cannot envision them in heaven as they seem to compromise *dignitas*. The hypothetical scar of a risen martyr, then, is not a "dis-ability," but indicates the opposite, a distinct ability, the steadfastness in faith with which the martyrs accepted even something as negative as impairments for Christ. The eternal indication of glory may be an element of continuity in relation to the temporal impairments in creation, but to point out the martyrs' honor, they must not be congenital or due to accident.

²⁸ Augustine's expression *loci vulnerum* partly follows the majority of the *Vetus Latina* manuscripts and the Vulgate, which read "*locus clavorum*" ("place of the nails"; ITSEE n.d.).

7. People with Disabilities as Bad Omens

In another passage in *ciu.* that discusses “*monstra*” (507:7–33 [21.8]), Augustine answers the question of why God created people with congenital disabilities on purpose: “they must show (*monstrare*) . . . what God is about to do” (507:26–27 [21.8]). Augustine cites pagan Roman statements about *monstra* and other phenomena, explicitly remarking on their traditional understanding as omens (Gevaert and Laes 2013, 214). He makes this connection by twice citing an etymology that derives the word *monstrum*, Latin for a person with nonstandard physical features, from *monstrare*, to show. As in 16.8, *mirabilia* play an important role in 21.8. Another connection between 16.8 and 21.8 consists in the fact that 16.8 speaks of people with intersex characteristics, to which 21.8 refers by the traditional name *prodigia* (Graumann 2013). Gerard O’Daly (2020) and David G. Hunter (2021) pass over these links between 16.8 and 21.8.²⁹ Others pick up on the relationship and suggest that Augustine saw people with disabilities positively as divine acts “showing”—as in the root word of *monstrum*, *monstrare*—God’s future salvation, yet without going into details of Augustine’s text (Brock 2019, 28, 41; Allély 2018, para. 20). In another interpretation, it has been suggested that Augustine “mocks the divinatory tendency to see monsters as signs to be read.” In this view, disabilities do not harbor any deeper meaning for Augustine, besides pointing to God’s astonishing power and transcendence, in which God creates “such a diversity of beings” (Long 2016, 718).³⁰

Interpretations like the latter two views may seem to emerge from books 21–22 because the two books speak of heaven and hell, disability and healing. The view that disabilities indicate God’s sheer power appears to rest specifically on Michel de Montaigne’s unsystematic reading of Augustine (Long 2016). A closer reading of books 21–22 has not been offered by commentators. However, book 21, which deals strictly with hell and disabilities, must not be conflated with book 22, which discusses heaven and healing. Augustine matches his dualistic eschatology with the binary of disability and health, with the two poles neatly separated out between two books.

Augustine indicates the context in which he comments on disabilities in 21.8 with the first, solemn sentence of *ciu.* 21. The entire book is a sustained apologetic defense of eternal corporeal punishment. Having already expounded the doctrine of hell at length in the previous book, Augustine now contends that even for those who do not rely on Scripture, it is by no means absurd to believe that in hell, God can make living bodies burn and suffer, all the while preserving these living bodies so that their suffering will never end (21.2–4). In critical dialogue with pagan thinkers, Augustine argues that eternal punishment cannot be ruled out simply as inconceivable according to the regular course of nature: pagan beliefs in wondrous phenomena in nature (*mirabilia*, 21.5) likewise indicate events that are highly unusual (O’Daly 2020, 250). This is where an understanding of disabilities as omens comes in.

²⁹ When commenting, briefly, on 16.8, O’Daly 2020 mentions “abnormalities,” but not monsters, prodigies, or *mirabilia*.

³⁰ See also Volp 2006, 316; Upson-Saia 2011, 104.

In a chapter discussing disabilities, 21.8, Augustine repeats the topic of discussion: “people are bound to burn forever” (503:25). Since his pagan adversaries dispute “the punishment of the damned that is to come,” he seeks to turn their own beliefs against them. It is the pagan Roman belief in “wondrous” portents itself that invalidates the pagan *contra naturam* objection to eternal damnation. Such bad omens testify for Augustine that hell is not scientifically impossible, so to speak. Disabilities testify to the reality of hell, broadly in keeping with pagan belief.

In 21.8, astrological portents are called *mirabiles*, and Augustine discusses disability in this context as well. Three times he mentions *monstra*, along with “signs” (*ostenta*), “portents” (*portenta*), and “prodigies” (*prodigia*). Repeatedly he declares that the deeper meaning of *monstra* consists in (*de-*)*monstrare*, to demonstrate and show something specific, just as “prodigies” (*prodigia*) “predict the future” (*futuram praedicant*). Augustine cites these etymologies from the pagan authority Marcus Varro, from the end of the Roman Republic, as evidence that hell is not an illusion. In the Roman Republic, people with anatomies neither clearly male nor female were considered *prodigies*, which were taken, like *monstra*, to announce some future harm (Graumann 2013). In 16.8, Augustine also writes about intersex persons as examples of *monstra*.

For Augustine, the old Roman understanding of persons with disabilities or intersex characteristics as bad omens convicts pagans of their error in their philosophical objection to the possibility of hell. Like other omens, people with congenital impairments (“*monstra*”) “must show” (*monstrare*) and prodigies must “predict [*praedicere*, as in *prodigia*] what God is about to do. God has announced in advance what he is about to do to the bodies, with no difficulty posing any obstacle, no natural law prescribing” God’s course of action (21.8). Chapter 21.9 picks up where this passage leaves off: “What God . . . said about the everlasting punishment of the damned, then, will take place in every respect.”

When portraying people with disabilities or nonbinary sex characteristics as embodying God’s warning of eternal hellfire in 21.8, Augustine does not say that they will themselves be punished. Nevertheless, the implications are negative. In *ciu.* 21, Augustine affirms hell vigorously, and books 20–21 have been a *locus classicus* of the doctrine (Hunsinger 1998, 410–15). One need not assume that Augustine views disabilities as punishment for the disabled person, but since a warning of hell would be in order where people—a family or a city perhaps—are implicated in sin, some connection between disabilities and sin is implied in 21.

Neither is it merely God’s power by itself that 21.8 sees indicated by deviant bodies, as commentators suggest, with disabilities not signifying hell specifically. Distinguishing very clearly between nonstandard bodies (book 21) and miraculous healings (book 22), Augustine understands each as an indication of only one of the two opposing outcomes of the last judgment. Deviant bodies announce eternal punishment, which is discussed in book 21, while in book 22, healing and wholeness announce God’s salvation.

If Augustine had merely wanted to emphasize God's sheer power, without any specific connection between disability and punishment, or healing and heaven, respectively, he would also have mentioned healings in book 21, which he does not do. Likewise, to highlight God's sheer power, Augustine would also have invoked God's power to create "wondrous" people with disabilities in book 22. Yet the numbers are even more lopsided there. First, in 22, Augustine mentions disability without healing in temporal life only twice, suggesting that disability is appropriate to "this wretched life"; disabilities exist "certainly for nothing else than to show that this condition of mortals is penal" (598:5.17 [22.19]). Secondly, in 22.8, Augustine recounts stories of no fewer than 23 individuals miraculously healed or restored to life. Augustine presents miraculous healings with particular "enthusiasm" (Hunter 2021, 289), with God's healing power foreshadowing specifically God's salvific power to give eternal life to ensouled bodies in heaven. In books 21–22, disabilities foreshadow future suffering and judgment, and conversely, healing signifies salvation.

That does not mean that people with disabilities were not good creatures. People with disabilities will by no means as such be sentenced to hell, and they may very well hope for life in heaven. Yet book 21 sees their disabilities as symptoms of the "*civitas diaboli*" (487:9 [21.1]) that give a warning as they announce its terrible end. Disabilities are not bad for that reason, since even hell is good in Augustine's eyes (1993a, 586:4–6 [13.21], 1993b, 610:16–21 [22.24]). Nevertheless, in making these points, Augustine appreciates discriminatory pagan beliefs as a *praeparatio evangelica*.

8. Conclusion and Outlook

In the anthropology of *ciu.*, the dignity of the living human person, of the ensouled body or the embodied soul, emerges in the interplay of the body's beauty, rationality, and utility. The upright posture of the human body directs the mind to ponder divine things, and the body's beauty reflects God's own beauty. Disabilities, by contrast, reduce the creature's embodied rationality and beauty. They may direct the human gaze toward the ground, for example, or upset the body's symmetry. "Deformity defeats beauty." In Augustine's view, disabilities reduce dignity.

Based on this interpretation, the other dimensions of disability in *ciu.* are readily explicable. Augustine's statement that people with disabilities are creatures of an absolutely competent God (16.8) asserts that God intended them precisely the way they are, and this indirectly reaffirms that the experience of life with disabilities requires justification—notably, a justification that Augustine assumes cannot be given within the limited confines of creaturely experience, but only by transcending it in faith.

Moreover, the competence of the creator cannot be questioned even if disabilities might seem to endanger the creature's eternal happiness. For disabilities will be taken away in the resurrection for eternal life. The bodies of the risen saints will

reflect God's own beauty. It is possible that the maimed martyrs will display scars that abide even after their heavenly healing, but if so, "there will not be *deformitas* in them, but *dignitas*." Such dignity is not inherent in impairments as such; rather it is the dignity of that moral achievement of the martyrs that only brought their impairments on them as a consequence.

By contrast, impairments that are congenital or due to accidents serve a purpose as long as they last, and once that task is fulfilled, they will be removed. That task consists in confronting the worldly city with a warning of eternal bodily punishment—by and large in keeping with the ancient, discriminatory pagan beliefs that saw people with disabilities and intersex characteristics as bad omens. Miraculous healing, by contrast, foreshadows eternal salvation in this life.

In his theological interpretation of disabilities, Augustine is a child of his time. That may not be surprising. In a concluding perspective, however, I argue that an alternative to Augustine's inherent tension between disability and salvation, or *deformitas* and *dignitas*, was available in the message proclaimed by the Apostle Paul about Christ's power that is perfected in Paul's weakness (2 Corinthians 12:9).

Presumably, Paul had a physical disability, which may have resulted from the abuse he suffered during his missionary activity (Glancy 2010, 39), unless it consisted of epilepsy or resulted from an accident (Collins 2011; Moss 2012). When Augustine mentions 2 Corinthians 12 in his sermons, he cites verses 7–8, which speak of Paul's weakness, and he sometimes stops short of citing verse 9. Tellingly, Augustine interprets Paul's weakness with the analogy of a medical procedure in which a surgeon hurts a patient—not for the sake of hurting him, but paradoxically in order to heal.³¹ For Augustine, the healing, or Christ's power in human weakness, consists in "eternal salvation" (Augustine 1997a, 2.5). Whether or not Augustine understood Paul's weakness as a disability, he thought of it as an atoning punishment. Augustine's commentary on Paul's suggestion that he carries Christ's stigmata (Galatians 6:17) points in the same direction (Augustine 2003, 234–35).³²

Occasionally, exegetes working on disabilities in Paul's thought likewise understand Paul's disability in negative terms, setting up his weakness and strength in a competitive relationship, suggesting that being weak excludes being strong at the same time. For Martin Albl, Paul's weakness in this life is a prerequisite of power and glory, yet that does not refer to this life, but life after death (2007, 148, 152). For Isaac T. Soon, Paul's disability can only have been mild, so as not to diminish the range and success of his missionary activities (2021, 380).

The aspect of lament may not be absent from Paul's writing about his disabilities, yet he does not affirm the goodness of his condition merely in a leap of faith or as the price to pay for eternal life. Rather, his disability lends strength to

³¹ Augustine 1992a, sections 5–6; 1992b, section 8; 1995, section 7, 1997a, section 2.5; and 1997b, section 9.

³² Augustine interprets Paul's *stigmata* as bodily marks with which God punished Paul for persecuting the churches.

his ministry (1 Corinthians 2:1–5) because it is a good vehicle of Christ’s power, which lies in the weakness of the cross (1 Corinthians 1:17.18.24–25, 2:5). Paul presents his own disability as “a source of improbable power” (Glancy 2010, 24). The disability adds to Paul’s dignity in the congregation. By contrast, a missionary’s rhetorical brilliance, perhaps displaying the rationality of the soul, would have been a performative self-contradiction (1 Corinthians 1:17). The recipients of Paul’s message are themselves clearly flawed (1 Corinthians 1:26). As a result, Paul’s flawed rhetoric is highly credible for this audience. That is how the Corinthian rabble end up justified and sanctified (1 Corinthians 6:9–11), even becoming the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:12–13). Paul announces that when he returns to Corinth to settle differences, he will share both in the weakness and power of Christ’s cross (2 Corinthians 13:3). Paul’s focus is not on some analogy between the human body and the “beauty” that God has put on, but on the way that human weakness becomes a unique vehicle for God’s power.

Paul’s reflection in 2 Corinthians 12:9 is one significant exception to the claim made by disability theorists David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder that “the New Testament defined the morality of a new religious ethos based largely upon the cure of cripples and their subsequent admission to the realm of the sacred” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 65). The authors suggest that disabilities are seen as “a problem in need of a solution” in almost any culture, which “situates people with disabilities in a profoundly ambivalent relationship to the cultures and stories they inhabit” (Mitchell and Snyder 2000, 47). For theologian Sharon V. Betcher, healing narratives in the New Testament are even “texts of terror” (Betcher 2013), unless interpreted as political metaphors. Augustine strongly amplifies the message that disabilities are a problem, even if, paradoxically, God created them on purpose. As Paul’s complementary understanding of disability and strength contrasts with Augustine’s inherent tension between *deformatas* and *dignitas*, it presents one way of experiencing disabilities as God’s good creation.

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