

Fleshing Out the Strength of Weakness: Intercorporeality in the Theological Discourse on Disability

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■ Abstract

In the context of theological interpretations of disabilities, I am arguing for the concept of “strength in weakness.” So far, a “theology of weakness,” which portrays people with disabilities as pointedly illustrating universal human weakness, has played a very prominent role in the field. I argue that this theological interpretation of disabilities should not be the dominant one. I trace the alternative model of “strength in weakness” in discussing writings by the apostle Paul and describe how it is supported by the anthropological concept of intercorporeality. Yet first, the article discusses Stanley Hauerwas’s theology of disability, which is not only a very pointed theology of weakness but also repeatedly associates disabilities with suffering. Since at least the latter aspect is in contrast with widespread self-perceptions among people with disabilities, a theology of weakness amounts to a “narrative prosthesis” (David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder). By contrast, Paul suggests that weakness can allow for distinct strengths. To flesh out distinctive competences of people with intellectual disabilities, I then discuss Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intercorporeality. Intercorporeality denotes a human competence more generally, but I suggest that it is often partly eclipsed by social norms. However, people with intellectual disabilities often pay less attention to

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social norms, which helps explain a distinctive intercorporeal competence among people with intellectual disabilities. Reduced attention to social norms can imply a distinctive strength.

■ Keywords

disability, weakness, strength, intercorporeality, Merleau-Ponty, Hauerwas, the apostle Paul

■ Introduction

A “theology of weakness”¹ has played a prominent role in the theological discussion of disabilities. For example, Thomas E. Reynolds highlights how his son’s disabilities make more obvious those vulnerabilities that no one, disabled or otherwise, is without.² Here, people with disabilities are messengers of an inconvenient truth about universal human weakness. It is a liberating message not only because humans are incapable of escaping vulnerability, but also because an open acknowledgment of vulnerabilities contributes to a more humane life.

In this view, disability is not a tragedy that calls for compassion. Alluding to 2 Cor 12:9, Reynolds calls the unmasking of illusions about vulnerabilities a “strength in weakness.”³ Here, strength first appears to be something other than weakness, yet ultimately it consists in a more ready acceptance precisely of weakness.

There are situations in which this interpretation of disabilities is helpful. Nevertheless, this article seeks to flesh out an alternative concept in the theology of disabilities: a concept of strength in weakness in which strength consists in a “community-forming power”⁴ that takes various forms and draws on particular anthropological dimensions, rather than in a ready acknowledgment of weakness.

By contrast, a theology of weakness should not be the default or dominant theological interpretation of disabilities. In its theologically full-throated expressions, it sees the salvific lowliness of the crucified Christ reflected in disabilities. Jean Vanier—who was revered in his lifetime but who exploited women sexually⁵—describes people with intellectual disabilities as “living icons of

¹ The term is used prominently, for example, by Amos Yong, *The Bible, Disability, and the Church: A New Vision of the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

² Thomas E. Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion: A Theology of Disability and Hospitality* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2008) 84.

³ *Ibid.*, 210.

⁴ Peter Lampe, “Theological Wisdom and the ‘Word about the Cross’: The Rhetorical Scheme in I Corinthians 1–4,” *Int* 44 (1990) 117–31, at 127.

⁵ Vanier subjected at least 25 women to sexual violence. There are no indications Vanier did sexual violence to people with disabilities. L’Arche International, “Publication of the report of the Study Commission mandated by L’Arche International,” Paris, 30 January 2023, https://www.larche.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Press_Release-LArche_International-2022-01-30-EN-V3.pdf. I am discussing Vanier nevertheless because family members of people with disabilities suggest that people with disabilities have benefited from his work. Brian Brock, “The Troubled Inheritance of

the crucified Son,” quoting John Paul II but omitting the pope’s reference to their “talents.”⁶ Vanier goes further than Reynolds, who does not consider disabilities analogous to torture and disputes that people with disabilities should be defined by vulnerabilities.⁷ With a clear focus on the cross, by contrast, it is difficult for a theology of weakness to avoid the implication that disabilities increase suffering. Even short of that, a consistent focus on disability as weakness may not do justice to the way people with disabilities and their families see themselves: they may be active community members who benefit from discovering their talents.

I will first discuss an influential theology of weakness with Stanley Hauerwas’s thought on disabilities, which is propelled by a certain theology of the cross. After describing such a theologically loaded emphasis on the perceived weakness of people with disabilities as a “narrative prosthesis,” a concept proposed by David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, this article makes two contributions toward taking the views of people with disabilities and their allies more seriously and appreciating disabilities theologically. First, in a discussion of the apostle Paul and his disability, I argue that weaknesses also allow for distinct strengths. Second, I draw on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intercorporeality to spell out why in embodied social interactions, people with certain intellectual disabilities are not fundamentally held back by some deficit in abstract mental operations, as a representationalist or intellectualist framework would suggest. Based on various accounts of interactions with people with intellectual disabilities, I propose my own understanding of why the intercorporeal competence of various people with disabilities can amount to a distinctive strength. People with intellectual disabilities tend to follow social conventions less. That is often a strength rather than a deficit, as social conventions can eclipse intercorporeal competence and reduce interpersonal strengths.

■ Hauerwas’s Theology of Weakness

Hauerwas’s thought on disabilities is fundamentally shaped by the conviction that salvation is based on Christ’s suffering in the weakness of the cross. God does not mean for people to be self-sufficient. Engaging in a theological “transvaluation of values” that sees weakness positively, Hauerwas devotes much attention to people with intellectual disabilities, whom he considers overtly limited and weak. For Hauerwas, people with disabilities even manifest God’s own being as revealed on the cross:

Jean Vanier: Locating the Fatal Theological Mistakes,” *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36 (2023) 433–56.

⁶ John Paul II, “Message of John Paul II on the Occasion of the International Symposium on the Dignity and Rights of the Mentally Disabled Person,” *The Holy See*, January 2004, <https://tinyurl.com/4mtrhf7e>; Jean Vanier in Stanley Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently in a Violent World: The Prophetic Witness of Weakness* (2nd ed.; Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018) 38–39.

⁷ Reynolds, *Vulnerable Communion*, 188. See also the significance of creativity and transformation in *ibid.*, ch. 6.

God's face is the face of the retarded [*sic.*]; God's body is the body of the retarded; God's being is that of the retarded. For the God we Christians must learn to worship is not a god of self-sufficient power, a god who in self-possession needs no one; rather ours is a God who needs a people, who needs a son. Absoluteness of being or power is not a work of the God we have come to know through the cross of Christ.⁸

Hauerwas also highlights God's own weakness: "The God we Christians worship is the God of the sacrifice, the God of weakness and suffering, who draws us to his table not by coercive power but by sacrificial love . . . the weakness of God is no sham; this is fully manifest in the absolute commitment which leads him to become a man and to suffer, even to dying on a cross."⁹

For Hauerwas, people with disabilities disclose what human life is ultimately about before God and illustrate how everybody needs the community of the church.¹⁰ Everybody needs assistance; those who are not disabled, however, also require assistance in unmasking the illusion of self-sufficiency and strength.¹¹ "Prophetlike, the retarded only remind us of the insecurity hidden in our false sense of self-possession."¹² "It is almost as if they have been given a natural grace to be free from the regret most of us feel for our neediness."¹³ Hauerwas sees persons with disabilities as "gifts" since they confront others with the good news that they are also weak and that God embraces them in their weakness.

For Hauerwas, accepting one's own neediness and dependence is possible because the church is the communion in which members share their pain before God and engage in painful openness when confessing their sin.¹⁴ This embrace of weakness contrasts with the pursuit of autonomy characterizing wider society. Hauerwas's view does not engage with the questioning of unbridled autonomy that has also taken place in secular discourse, however, but assumes that autonomy remains the societal ideal.¹⁵ Hauerwas also asks whether those who manifest their

⁸ Stanley Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded: Should We Prevent Retardation?," in *Critical Reflections on Stanley Hauerwas' Theology of Disability: Disabling Society, Enabling Theology* (ed. John Swinton; London: Routledge, 2005) 87–107, at 104; see also Hauerwas, "Reflections on Suffering, Death, and Medicine," in idem, *Suffering Presence: Theological Reflections on Medicine, the Mentally Handicapped, and the Church* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1986) 23–38, at 31; Hauerwas and Bonita Raine, "The Moral Challenge of the Handicapped," in Hauerwas, *Suffering Presence*, 182–88, at 187.

⁹ Hauerwas, "Christian Care of the Retarded," *ThTo 30* (1973) 130–37, at 132.

¹⁰ Hauerwas, "The Church and the Mentally Handicapped: A Continuing Challenge to the Imagination," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 53–62, at 61.

¹¹ Hauerwas and Raine, "The Moral Challenge," 184.

¹² Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded," 97.

¹³ Hauerwas, "Community and Diversity: The Tyranny of Normality," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 37–43, at 41; Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded," 102.

¹⁴ Hauerwas, "Salvation and Health: Why Medicine Needs the Church," in *The Hauerwas Reader* (ed. John Berkman and Michael Cartwright, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001) 539–56, at 553.

¹⁵ *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (ed.

human limitations openly suffer from those limitations. Although he sometimes disputes that, he sometimes assumes that they do.

According to Hauerwas, people with disabilities manifest God's grace in the way they slow down those who do not have disabilities. They helpfully obstruct the quest to "save" the world, forcing others to see that the world has already been saved.¹⁶ Imposing their slowness on those with a messiah complex, people with disabilities make them see that "we have all the time we need to do what needs to be done,"¹⁷ and no extraordinary achievements are necessary.

In Hauerwas's writings on disability, the theme of God's vulnerability on the cross is more prominent than, for example, the themes of creation or inspiration by the Spirit.¹⁸ Sometimes Hauerwas speaks of Christ's resurrection in addition to the cross. However, in the resurrection Christ did not simply leave suffering behind; rather, God took sides with the suffering Christ. Hauerwas supplements John H. Yoder's theology of "cruciform" discipleship¹⁹ by arguing that the appreciation of people with disabilities is a criterion of whether the church is faithful to the crucified and risen lord. Occasionally, Hauerwas draws on the theme of creation to argue that humans, not having created themselves, are needy and not self-sufficient; yet, what starts in these cases as an argument about the theology of creation ends as an argument about Christ's cross and resurrection.²⁰ Moreover, it is the theology of the cross that brings out his more radical claim that even God is not self-sufficient.²¹

When Hauerwas addresses disabilities, hubris appears as the primary form of sin, although in another context he identifies another form of sin.²² The problem is not that people act in contradiction to the created order or do too little, but that they tend to overestimate their strength and take on responsibilities that are not

Catriona MacKenzie and Natalie Stoljar; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002); Martha Albertson Fineman, *The Autonomy Myth: A Theory of Dependency* (New York: New Press, 2004); *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New Essays* (ed. John Christman and Joel Anderson; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); *Vulnerability: New Essays in Ethics and Feminist Philosophy* (ed. Catriona Mackenzie, Wendy Rogers, and Susan Dodds; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

¹⁶ Hauerwas, "The Church," 58, 61.

¹⁷ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 47, 54.

¹⁸ See also Hauerwas, "The Gesture of a Truthful Story," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 71–80, at 73, 76–77.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75, 79.

²⁰ Stanley Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends: Living with the Handicapped," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 11–26, at 16, 20; Hauerwas, "The Gesture," 77; *idem*, "Reflection on Dependency: A Response to Responses to My Essays on Disability," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 191–97, at 193.

²¹ For further references to the cross, see Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 16; *idem*, "The Gesture," 75; *idem*, "Having and Learning to Care for Retarded Children," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 149–59, at 154, 158. *Pace* John Swinton, "The Importance of Being a Creature: Stanley Hauerwas on Disability," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader* (ed. Brian Brock and Swinton; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012) 512–44.

²² Hauerwas, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Truth and Politics," *Center of Theological Inquiry Reflections* 6 (2002) 30–55.

theirs. This has also been a classic position in a particular interpretation of Paul's theology of the cross that was influential in twentieth-century German Protestantism, which sees Christ's redeeming suffering on our behalf as countering the hubris of self-justification. Christ's gift exposes people as sinners in need of mercy.²³ This particular theology of the cross reinforces Hauerwas's view that worship of the crucified Christ must include a rebuttal of all striving for rational autonomy. Ernst Käsemann's summary of this theology of the cross addresses Hauerwas's themes of weakness and rational autonomy with the terms *strength* and *wisdom* (see 1 Cor 1–2): the theology of the cross “exposes man's illusion that he can transcend himself and effect his own salvation, that he can all by himself maintain his own strength, his own wisdom, his own piety and his own self-praise even towards God.”²⁴ While this particular theology of the cross starts with the premise of salvation in Christ, two practical implications are to protest against the hubris of special achievements and to inculcate the patience that is required of Christians if salvation is not dependent on any baseline IQ. For Hauerwas, “woundedness” is the abiding characterization of the Christian life going forward,²⁵ and that defines the special theological value of people with disabilities.

■ Hauerwas's Theology of Disability and the “Narrative Prosthesis”

Hauerwas writes candidly that he has wondered if he instrumentalizes people with disabilities: “the handicapped” were “the crack I desperately needed to give concreteness to my critique of modernity.”²⁶ Hauerwas's response is that to use people with disabilities as theological object lessons may infringe on the respect for human autonomy that is fundamental to modernity; yet he argues that in the story in which the church sees all human lives embedded—creation, the cross, the resurrection, and the church—autonomy does not feature nearly as prominently. In Christian ethics, he argues, everyone is meant to live the story God has chosen for them, rather than to create their own story autonomously. An instrumentalization of others in service to that story may well be legitimate in his eyes.²⁷

Hauerwas is not alone in singling out people with disabilities for sustained attention in pursuit of a wider point. Disability theorists Mitchell and Snyder observe the near ubiquity of disabilities in literature. The most varied authors, from Sophocles's *Oedipus the King* to Montaigne's essays and Friedrich Nietzsche's *Thus*

²³ See Eberhard Jüngel, *God as the Mystery of the World: On the Foundation of the Theology of the Crucified One in the Dispute between Theism and Atheism* (trans. D. Guder; London: Bloomsbury, 2014) 340. See also Hauerwas, “Christian Care,” 133.

²⁴ Käsemann, *Perspectives on Paul* (trans. M. Kohl; London: SCM, 1971) 40; see Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (trans. Robert Brawley; Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2015) 114.

²⁵ Hauerwas citing Vanier in Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 80.

²⁶ Hauerwas, “Timeful Friends,” 14; idem, introduction to *Suffering Presence*, 1–19, at 15.

²⁷ Hauerwas, “Timeful Friends,” 16; Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 81.

Spoke Zarathustra and beyond, negotiate cultural norms by discussing disability. Mitchell and Snyder argue that for the authors and their readers, the trope of disability functions as a “narrative prosthesis.”

A prosthesis helps to compensate for some lack. Disability functions as a prosthesis in Sophocles’s literary craft, for example, as Oedipus’s lameness lends narrative plausibility to his solving the sphinx’s riddle, which literally features a crutch. However, Oedipus’s disabilities remain “inconsequential for the myth’s plot.”²⁸ Sophocles has no interest in a lame person’s experience of life. There is nothing inherently wrong with using a prosthesis, literally or a figuratively, but too often the narrative prosthesis does not live up to literary standards: depictions of disability are “overdetermined” and stereotypical, rather than “open-ended,”²⁹ realistic, and involving a plausible character development.

Disability can also function as a literary foothold for an author’s subversive message, as is the case with Montaigne and Nietzsche.³⁰ Even the subversive use of the trope of disability, where the impairment is not presented as in need of a cure, often ends up preserving the ideological order of society. Nondisabled society displays “representational power,”³¹ but, ironically, it makes people with disabilities do someone else’s bidding because it perceives disability as a challenge that must be integrated based on the terms of nondisabled society.

Hauerwas’s theology of disability helps his critique of modern autonomy flesh out how meaningful lives can be lived in weakness and acknowledged dependence. Is Hauerwas’s theology of disability a legitimate prosthesis? An evaluation of Hauerwas’s discussion of disability should not depend merely on whether he respects personal autonomy; he disputes, after all, that respect for autonomy is a valid theological norm. Rather than valuing autonomy, he suggests, Christians should see their lives as embedded in a story not of their own making. For this reason, the following section will examine the way Hauerwas incorporates people with disabilities into the theological story. He interprets this story by drawing a parallel between the cross and life with disabilities, assuming that people with disabilities embrace this perspective. Yet does he do justice to people with disabilities: is their situation roughly what he thinks it is in locating them in the Christian story?

■ Hauerwas on Disabilities: The Question of Suffering

The way Hauerwas perceives people with disabilities in offering them a story is important for whether they may identify with that story.³² What kinds of disabilities

²⁸ David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001) 61.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 60, 48.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 66.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 49.

³² For an appreciative critique, see John Swinton, “Who Is the God We Worship? Theologies of

does Hauerwas chiefly have in mind? John Swinton asserts that Hauerwas's focus is on "severe" or "profound" intellectual disabilities.³³ However, what he usually has in mind are people with Down syndrome.³⁴ In one article Hauerwas virtually equates "retardation" with Down syndrome.³⁵ Further, when he suggests that "God's face" is that of "the retarded," he appears to envision the characteristic features of someone with Down syndrome. In only one article each does he focus on those with "severe" intellectual disabilities or speaks of multiple disabilities.³⁶ A later article discusses autism.³⁷

Down syndrome typically varies in the forms it takes. Together with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), it is the most common cause of congenital intellectual disability, and, like the majority of intellectual disabilities, typically it is not severe. Children with Down syndrome develop more slowly and do not reach the same level of standard skills as others.³⁸ Yet, already in 1989 a specialist wrote in a popular guidebook that, during the previous twenty years, children with Down syndrome had received increasing social support, living relatively active lives.³⁹

The question of whether theologians portray disability essentially as weakness and dependence is also a powerful diagnostic tool beyond Hauerwas's work. As part of a care ethics, Rosemary Garland-Thomson has portrayed disabilities as highlighting the fundamental value of life, which imbues the basic nursing work of bodily care with profound meaning. She emphasizes that the need for nursing care in people with disabilities illustrates universal human vulnerabilities. Both are significant points, yet here one problem is that Garland-Thomson makes dependence on basic bodily care the dominant feature of disability.⁴⁰

A significant question raised by Hauerwas is that of whether the "weakness" of the mentally disabled causes them to suffer. A stereotypical view of people with disabilities as weak might include the stereotypical assumption of suffering, yet that would contradict the experience of many people with disabilities, who

Disability; Challenges and New Possibilities," *Journal of Practical Theology* 14 (2011) 273–307; Hans S. Reinders, *Receiving the Gift of Friendship: Profound Disability, Theological Anthropology, and Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008) 201–203.

³³ Swinton, "The Importance," 517; Swinton, "Who Is the God," 448.

³⁴ E.g., Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends."

³⁵ Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded," 98; idem, "Having and Learning to Care," 157; idem, "Suffering, Medical Ethics, and the Retarded Child," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 135–40, at 139. See also Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded," 89, 99; idem, "Reflection on Dependency," 195–96.

³⁶ Hauerwas, "The Retarded and the Criteria for the Human," *The Linacre Quarterly* 40 (1973) 217–22; idem, "The Retarded, Society, and the Family: The Dilemma of Care," in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 161–79, at 165.

³⁷ Hauerwas, "Disability: An Attempt to Think With," in idem, *Approaching the End: Eschatological Reflection on Church, Politics and Life* (London: SCM, 2014) 222–36.

³⁸ Mark Selikowitz, *Down Syndrome* (3rd ed.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008) 44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, ix.

⁴⁰ Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, "Disability Liberation Theology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy and Disability* (ed. Adam Cureton and David Wasserman; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020) 100–120, at 114–16.

report a good quality of life.⁴¹ Here Hauerwas's views on disabilities and suffering are ambiguous. Occasionally he speaks of the "joys and sufferings" of people with disabilities,⁴² while he sometimes speaks only of suffering and not of joy.⁴³ Sometimes he argues that the social environment causes people with disabilities to suffer or even disputes that disabilities themselves cause suffering (see below). Nevertheless, he sometimes assumes that disabilities themselves are in fact the source of suffering. For example, he argues against the idea that disabilities justify abortions, writing that "such suffering should not tempt us to think our task is to eliminate those whose suffering seems pointless."⁴⁴ In these instances, Hauerwas seems indebted to a medical model of disability, which understands disabilities as deviations from a medical norm.⁴⁵ Like a broken leg, such deviations then appear to cause suffering inherently.

Suffering also figures prominently in Hauerwas's interpretation of Michael Bérubé's account of his son James, who has Down syndrome and other disabilities. Hauerwas cites Michael Bérubé to make his crucial point: if the Bérubés "had known that their child's life 'would be suffering and misery for all concerned' they might have chosen to have an abortion."⁴⁶ Michael Bérubé indeed thinks that an abortion could be justified if there is a realistic prospect of severe suffering. Bérubé also writes that he finds it difficult to discuss that "now that he [i.e., James] is here"⁴⁷—a statement that Hauerwas considers "the nub of the matter."⁴⁸ Hauerwas deplores that, seemingly, for Michael Bérubé the argument about abortion is rendered moot only by the fact that he cannot turn back time—even though he loves James with his disabilities.

⁴¹ Brian G. Skotko, Susan P. Levine, and Richard Goldstein, "Having a Son or Daughter with Down Syndrome: Perspectives from Mothers and Fathers," *American Journal of Medical Genetics* 155 (2010) 2335–47; idem, "Having a Brother or Sister with Down Syndrome: Perspectives from Siblings," *American Journal of Medical Genetics* 155 (2010) 2348–59; idem, "Self-perceptions from People with Down Syndrome," *American Journal of Medical Genetics* 155 (2010) 2360–69; Gary Albrecht and Patrick Devlieger, "The Disability Paradox: High Quality of Life against All Odds," *Social Science and Medicine* 48 (1998) 977–88.

⁴² Hauerwas, "Suffering the Retarded," 103.

⁴³ Hauerwas, "Suffering, Medical Ethics."

⁴⁴ Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 16. See similar comments in idem, introduction to *Suffering Presence*, 18; idem, "Reflections on Suffering"; idem, "Community," 43; idem, "Suffering the Retarded," 89. Idem, "Suffering, Medical Ethics" consistently assumes that having disabilities means to suffer, but while Hauerwas suggests that other people are the source of suffering and not the disabilities, on occasion there is some ambiguity (139). Importantly, idem, "Disability," 222, portrays ASD stereotypically as suffering.

⁴⁵ On models, see Tom Shakespeare, *Disability Rights and Wrongs Revisited* (2nd ed.; London: Routledge, 2013) 11–13, 21–23, 50–52.

⁴⁶ Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 15, citing from Michael Bérubé, *Life As We Know It: A Father, a Family, and an Exceptional Child* (New York: Vintage, 1998) 47.

⁴⁷ Bérubé, *Life*, 47 (also cited in Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 15).

⁴⁸ Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 15.

Here the assumption that disabilities cause suffering is a misrepresentation of Michael Bérubé's account. Bérubé only speaks of "suffering and misery" to characterize a harmful, misleading stereotype. Hauerwas suggests that James suffers in direct contradiction to Michael's portrayal.

The Bérubés declined prenatal tests during the pregnancy with James; yet Bérubé argues that, had they chosen prenatal testing, chances are the test would not only have detected Down syndrome but would also have been interpreted incorrectly as indicating "suffering and misery for all concerned," in keeping with older, erroneous medical views. Bérubé does not write, as Hauerwas suggests, "if we had known that our child's life would be suffering and misery." Bérubé writes instead, "if we had been as seriously misinformed about Jamie's prospects in the spring of 1991 as were most previous generations of parents . . . and if we were persuaded that our child's life would be nothing but suffering and misery for all concerned, James included, then it's quite possible that we would have chosen to have an abortion instead." Crucially, the abortion scenario rests not solely on the counterfactual condition of prenatal testing but also on the additional hypothetical of an erroneous interpretation of a positive test result, which such tests were often given.

Hauerwas's independent choice of the word *to know* suggests that he considers a highly negative interpretation of a test ("suffering and misery") accurate, in contrast to Bérubé's account. For Bérubé, a realistic prospect of severe suffering could make an abortion moral, but he suggests that "it's preposterous to speak as if you know someone is 'suffering' from his or her disability."⁴⁹ Erroneously assuming that "suffering and misery" is a reality for James, Hauerwas describes James's life in his own words as "nothing but dependence."⁵⁰ By contrast, Bérubé portrays his son as "a loving, self-aware, irreplaceable" child⁵¹ who plays imaginatively, dances, laughs, attends day care, learns to speak and eventually to write.⁵²

Elsewhere, Hauerwas suggests that people with disabilities suffer at the hands of the medical system and from injustices more generally.⁵³ Such statements do not attribute suffering inherently to disabilities, although they still highlight suffering especially.⁵⁴ Further, in an article alluded to above, Hauerwas disputes explicitly that Down syndrome inherently increases the amount of suffering a person experiences. Here he follows the social model of disability by arguing that society is often unwilling to accommodate the needs of people with intellectual disabilities. In addition, Hauerwas suggests that, fearing suffering, people rashly

⁴⁹ Bérubé, *Life*, 254.

⁵⁰ Hauerwas, "Timeful Friends," 14.

⁵¹ Bérubé, *Life*, 82.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 47.

⁵³ Hauerwas, "Community," 41, 42.

⁵⁴ Hauerwas (*ibid.* 41–42) lists several benefits parents derive from having children with disabilities, but none for these children themselves, whom he regards as suffering (from injustice: 41; from hemophilia: 43).

project suffering on people with disabilities, which makes the nondisabled suffer in misplaced empathy.⁵⁵

In its more thoroughly theological arguments, however, the same article goes on to suggest that an impairment inherently increases suffering after all. Hauerwas argues that to affirm disabilities, and suffering along with it, makes people more moral: suffering is an important antidote to a misguided striving for achievements. He suggests that the motivation of preventing suffering through abortions is ultimately wrong because it is likely to result in more harm than good.⁵⁶ Further, Hauerwas appeals to a theology of the cross when suggesting in this article that “we have come to know [God] through the cross of Christ,” and, in the same breath, that “God’s body is the body of the retarded.”⁵⁷ Yet to treat people with disabilities as representations of the crucified Christ means to assert a connection between disability and suffering that is more drastic than the moral injury of the social model of disability. On the cross, Christ suffered extreme physical torture. Both Hauerwas’s more general antiabortion argument and his strong reliance on the theology of the cross result in a misleading portrayal of people with disabilities as suffering.

Although Hauerwas’s account includes some nuance, his views on disabilities repeatedly contrast with the experience of many people by highlighting suffering especially. Hauerwas’s proposal that people with disabilities suffer in parallel with Christ is thoroughly theological; it can also seem profound compared to his more pedestrian, nontheological view that the attribution of suffering to people with disabilities is merely a misunderstanding. However, that christological suggestion overdetermines their portrayal. Disputing that people should create the stories of their own lives autonomously, he imposes a stereotypical, distorting identity of co-suffering in weakness on people with disabilities.

The story that results as people with disabilities embed their lives in God’s story may not be their own free creation, but it needs to be a narrative in which they recognize themselves. Hauerwas’s narrative prosthesis is not a legitimate one. His highly influential interpretation of disability illustrates how a theology of disability as weakness imposes on people with disabilities the view that they reflect Christ’s weakness on the cross, foregrounding the experience of suffering too much. Such a position is among those Garland-Thomson critiques: she describes certain theological views of disability as “a projection across a vast social and existential chasm” that she sees as “a colonizing move that turns the disabled subject into a sacred version of the noble savage figure.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Hauerwas, “Suffering the Retarded,” 92.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 95–96.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 104; see also *idem*, “Reflections on Suffering,” 31; Hauerwas and Raine, “The Moral Challenge,” 187.

⁵⁸ Garland-Thomson, “Disability Liberation Theology,” 110.

Further problems can result from the praise of weakness that recommends humility, contrasting with the attempt to minimize weakness in sinful pride. Feminist theologians have argued against pitting humility and pride against each other so prominently, which cements the acquiescent or submissive roles that society often reserves for women.⁵⁹ However, people with disabilities may profit more from support in discovering talents that they may have than from encouragement to claim their weakness as exemplars of humility.⁶⁰

■ Paul's Theology of the Cross: Power in Weakness

In a jointly written book, Hauerwas and Jean Vanier spoke of the “prophetic witness of weakness.”⁶¹ It was later discovered that Vanier exploited numerous non-disabled women sexually who were in a position of weakness in relation to his perceived spiritual authority. Vanier’s account of people with disabilities cannot be simply summarized with the notion of weakness: he also emphasizes that spending time with people with disabilities is fun and often makes him laugh.⁶² Nevertheless, Vanier avoids calling this a strength.⁶³ In dialogue with Hauerwas, Vanier asks how the strengths and weaknesses of people with disabilities are related⁶⁴ and, on another occasion, cites Paul’s statements from 1 Corinthians about God’s election of the weak and foolish in Christ, which shames the strong (1:25, 27; 2:3).⁶⁵ Weakness and foolishness were also keywords in Käsemann’s theology of the cross. However, Vanier stops short of mentioning Paul’s repeated point that Christ’s weakness is “the power of God” (1:17, 18, 24; 2:5), which is “stronger than human strength” (1:25).

Grant Macaskill likewise addresses 1 Cor 1–2 in his discussions of the Bible and ASD.⁶⁶ Paul articulates a contrast between his message and dominant values of strength and wisdom, which can fund a countercultural interpretation of the cross still today. In Macaskill’s comments, however, neither Paul’s affirmation of weakness nor that of strength plays a role. Speaking from experience, Macaskill does not consider autism a “deficit.”⁶⁷ He affirms autism as a “difference” that does

⁵⁹ Marjorie H. Suchocki, *The Fall to Violence: Original Sin in Relational Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995) 15–19.

⁶⁰ Brian Brock, “Theologizing Inclusion: 1 Corinthians 12 and the Politics of the Body of Christ,” *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 15 (2011) 351–76, at 357–58.

⁶¹ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently* (subtitle; see also 33).

⁶² Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 37.

⁶³ On the theological significance of weakness in Vanier’s theology, see also Patrick McKearney, “Receiving the Gift of Cognitive Disability: Recognizing Agency in the Limits of the Rational Subject,” *The Cambridge Journal of Anthropology* 36 (2018) 40–60, at 43, 45.

⁶⁴ Vanier, “Response: The Need of Strangers,” in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 27–30, at 28.

⁶⁵ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 30.

⁶⁶ Grant Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders and the New Testament: Preliminary Reflections,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 22 (2018) 15–41, at 23.

⁶⁷ Grant Macaskill, “Autism and Biblical Studies: Establishing and Extending the Field beyond Preliminary Reflection,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 25 (2021) 388–411.

not align with binaries like weakness and strength.⁶⁸ For him, that is insufficiently reflected in cultural evaluations of ASD that cluster around psychological descriptions—not least theological ones that see ASD in misleading proximity to psychopathy⁶⁹—yet, at best, these do not warrant more than preliminary indications. While Macaskill affirms distinctive mental trends among autistic people, they are not as straightforward as people assume.⁷⁰ By consequence, medical descriptions, social practices, and cultural symbols reinforce each other in marginalizing autistic people.⁷¹ A more helpful interplay of preliminary scientific descriptions, inclusive social practices, and cultural symbols is conceivable.

There are traits that are conventionally regarded as disabilities, although disabled people do not experience them as weakness. I do not have such traits in mind. Rather, my concern is with those theologies that portray disability as weakness in appealing to Paul distinctly as a “theologian of weakness”⁷² while ignoring the aspect of power in weakness. For example, Hans Reinders contrasts a certain theology of the cross with an appreciation of human agency. Focusing on agency, we too easily ignore the fundamental significance of God’s radical love expressed in the cross, he suggests, and that would be at odds with the value of profoundly disabled people. Highlighting weakness alone, Reinders argues that in the shadow of the cross, humans are recipients of God’s love and not agents. “When God sees humans, he sees woundedness in need of redemption.”⁷³

Such attention to the cross necessitates comments on Paul’s theology of the cross. First Corinthians 1–2 is among its foundational texts.⁷⁴ Paul even speaks of “God’s weakness” (1:25). Käsemann’s presentation of the theology of the cross interprets Paul’s affirmation of weakness as an acknowledgment that humans lack achievements before God.⁷⁵ Michael Wolter’s more recent discussion of Paul’s theology of the cross is less concerned with human achievement. His analysis draws on 1 Corinthians especially, where Paul emphasizes that the appreciation of God’s weakness and foolishness in the cross is true “wisdom.” This wisdom brings people from opposing sides of society together as one congregation.⁷⁶ Yet when Wolter compiles the signal contrasts in 1 Cor 1:18–25 (God/world, wisdom/foolishness, perishing/salvation), he overlooks the recurring theme of power and weakness. Often a theology of the cross focuses on weakness, but Paul repeatedly

⁶⁸ Ibid., 394, 408.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 394.

⁷⁰ Macaskill, “Autism Spectrum Disorders,” 18–20.

⁷¹ Macaskill seems close to the model of disability presented in Shakespeare, *Disability Rights*, 75–79. On models in the exegetical discourse on disability, see Arthur Dewey and Anna Miller, “Paul,” in *The Bible and Disability: A Commentary* (ed. Sarah Melcher, Mikeal Parsons, and Amos Yong; Norwich: SCM, 2018) 379–425, at 380.

⁷² Yong, *The Bible*, 89.

⁷³ Reinders, *Receiving the Gift*, 224.

⁷⁴ Wolter, *Paul*, 116–17.

⁷⁵ Käsemann, *Perspectives*, 38–40.

⁷⁶ Wolter, *Paul*, 116–17, 123.

calls the word of the cross a “power” that is active in the congregation (1:17, 18, 24, 25; 2:4.5).

If disability meant weakness chiefly, one might be skeptical as to whether Paul himself had a disability, given his intensive missionary activities. While 2 Cor 12:7 suggests that Paul indeed had a disability,⁷⁷ Isaac T. Soon suggests that the skills required for Paul’s ministry do not rule out a disability that compromised only skills not required for the mission specifically.⁷⁸ However, since 12:9 sees Christ’s power perfected precisely in Paul’s weakness, Paul’s disability may not simply have been a burden on his mission but also a benefit.

Martin Albl even argues that for Paul, weakness and the related concept of disability meant a “life of power and glory.”⁷⁹ This perspective contrasts with Paul’s own lament (2 Cor 12:7–9).⁸⁰ Indeed, Albl focuses especially on life and healing after death.⁸¹ However, Paul sees himself participating in Christ’s power in weakness already in this life (e.g., 2 Cor 13:4).

Speaking of weakness in 1 Cor 1–2, Paul contrasts Christ’s cross with “the wisdom of the world.” If there is any power inherent in the cross, it does not lie in some worldly ideal that Christ exemplifies. That does not mean, however, that the positive aspect of power should be ignored. By identifying Christ’s cross with power, Paul “wrests” from listeners “one of their most cherished terms” and gives it new meaning:⁸² a power that is differently powerful. This is a crucial move. It goes beyond an inversion that would see power in weakness to the extent that weakness reminds us of the universality of weakness. Instead, Paul differentiates between different kinds of power and places one kind in a complementary relationship with weakness. I will portray Paul’s power in weakness as a “community-forming power.”⁸³

Jennifer Glancy describes the suffering that Paul endured in persecution as bolstering his claim to authority, and hence to power: “because his experiences of physical abuse unite him with Jesus, Paul presents his abject body as evidence of his authority.”⁸⁴ Glancy focuses on Paul’s statement that Christ’s power is perfected

⁷⁷ Adela Yarbro Collins, “Paul’s Disability: The Thorn in His Flesh,” in *Disability Studies and Biblical Literature* (ed. Candida Moss and Jeremy Schipper; New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011) 165–83; see also below.

⁷⁸ Isaac T. Soon, “Disability and New Testament Studies: Reflections, Trajectories, and Possibilities,” *Journal of Disability and Religion* 25 (2021) 374–87, at 380.

⁷⁹ Martin Albl, “‘For Whenever I Am Weak, Then I Am Strong’: Disability in Paul’s Epistles,” in *This Aabled Body: Rethinking Disabilities in Biblical Studies* (ed. Hector Avalos, Sarah Melcher, and Jeremy Schipper; SemeiaSt; Atlanta: SBL Press, 2007) 145–58, at 148.

⁸⁰ Michael Tilly, “Behinderung als Thema des paulinischen Denkens,” in *Gestörte Lektüre. Disability als hermeneutische Leitkategorie biblischer Exegese* (ed. Wolfgang Grünstäudl and Markus Schiefer Ferrari; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2012) 67–80, at 79.

⁸¹ Albl, “For Whenever I Am Weak,” 148, appeals to Rom 6:5, 8:17. See also 152.

⁸² This claim partly cites a similar statement from Lampe, “Theological Wisdom,” 122.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 127.

⁸⁴ Jennifer Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge: Early Christian Bodies* (Oxford: Oxford University

in Paul's weakness (2 Cor 12:9), which echoes Paul's contention that "God's weakness is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor 1:25). Second Corinthians 12 includes Paul's reference to his "thorn in the flesh," a source of physical pain that appears to have resulted from the abuse he suffered during his missionary work.⁸⁵ This impairment seems to be involved when rival "super-apostles" in Corinth charge him with being "weak" (2 Cor 10:10).

"Always carrying around in the body Jesus's dying" (2 Cor 4:10), Paul sees his violated body in parallel to Jesus's crucified body. Christ's body is also the bearer of supreme power, and so Paul presents his own disability as "a source of improbable power."⁸⁶ Glancy further argues that Paul claims the power of his abused body in contrast to the martial values of his time. His wounds and hardships do not establish his power in the way that a soldier's battle scars attest to his hardness in duress. In Greco-Roman culture, wounds received on the chest were a sign of honor; but on the back, they attested to cowardice and shame.⁸⁷ Paul's wounds resulted from beatings and deprivation (1 Cor 4:11, 2 Cor 11:16–33), and it was emasculating to be "flogged" and "beaten" (2 Cor 11:23–25). Whatever Paul's impairment, context suggests (12:10) that the wounds received at the hands of his persecutors are part of the "thorn in the flesh" and the "weakness" mentioned in 2 Cor 12:7–9.

Candida R. Moss likewise sees Paul arguing in 2 Cor 12:7–10 that "he more readily houses the power of Christ"⁸⁸ than rival apostles. In addition to the parallel between Paul's impairment and Christ's cross, Paul's bodily weakness offers an opportunity for Christ to invade Paul's body, as spirits were thought to do with weak people. Moss's evaluation of the passage appears ambivalent: she seems to appreciate weakness as a strength that is "better" than the "masculine" value of rational clarity, but her portrayal of Paul also detects a jockeying for influence: "Throughout his epistles, Paul is accustomed to utilizing the discourse of persecution and suffering in order to legitimize his own authority and position himself as a mediator between Christ and the Pauline communities."⁸⁹

So far, Paul's interpretation of his weakness amounts to greater authority, but commentators also remark critically on Paul's competitive inclination.⁹⁰ The aspect of communion with Christ in his wounds can appear as strongly focused on Paul's person for his own sake. Is Paul's power in weakness essentially a piece of one-upmanship?

Press, 2010) 27.

⁸⁵ Annette Weissenrieder and Gregor Etzelmüller, "Illness and Healing in the Christian Tradition," in *Religion and Illness* (ed. idem; Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016) 263–305, at 297.

⁸⁶ Glancy, *Corporal Knowledge*, 24.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁸⁸ Candida R. Moss, "Christly Possession and Weakened Bodies: Reconsideration of the Function of Paul's Thorn in the Flesh (2 Cor. 12:7–10)," *Journal of Religion, Disability and Health* 16 (2012) 319–33, at 329.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 328.

⁹⁰ See also Dewey and Miller, "Paul," 389–400.

Here, I add two points to the interpretation of Christ's power in Paul's weakness to emphasize Paul's orientation toward community. First, in the light of the cross, Paul finds deeper meaning in the fact that his own rhetoric is less than stellar (1 Cor 1:17, 2:2–3; 2 Cor 11:6). If the word of the cross were proclaimed by all-around brilliant geniuses, the result would be a performative self-contradiction (1 Cor 1:17). Yet Paul's proclamation had an effect in Corinth. Second, the Corinthians were themselves not of the respectable classes (1 Cor 1:26–27, 6:9–11). Apparently, Paul's unpretentious rhetoric was what it took to win over the dubious Corinthians for Christ. The unassuming preaching was the appropriate link between the message of the cross, the weak apostle, and the disreputable congregation. God's election of the foolish, manifest in the cross, reflected in Paul's lowliness and proclaimed in his suboptimal rhetoric, also means the election of the disreputable Corinthians. God's power is tangible in the very existence of the congregation: of all people in Corinth, it is these unsavory figures who have been sanctified and justified (6:11). So Paul's weakness played out as a strength in the upbuilding of the community. Paul "boasts" in the congregation (2 Cor 1:14, 7:14, 9:2), just as he "boasts" about his Christ-like suffering (11:16–30). In the face of the social stigma of the Corinthians,⁹¹ he calls the congregation a letter of reference in his favor (3:1–4).⁹² The Corinthian charge of weakness against Paul is self-defeating; the power of weakness is a "community-forming power" that was at work among the Corinthians themselves. Both Paul's flawed rhetoric and the disrespected but inclusive communities that do not present polished worship performances harbor a power that creates community. This way, people with disabilities may claim the power of weakness without placing their disabilities in parallel to Paul's or Jesus's violated bodies.

Paul appreciates those of a weak social standing also in 1 Cor 12. In the middle section of the chapter, Paul portrays the congregation as a body with various members (12:12–26) and argues that the contributions of the seemingly weaker members matter especially (vv. 22–23). It would contradict the organismic nature of the body if it were to disregard the feet or treat the genitalia with contempt. Without exception, the Spirit is at work for the community in everybody. Commentators have suggested that the contributions that people with disabilities make to congregations must be honored especially.⁹³

Paul's parable of the body speaks of "weaker," less honored members of the body (vv. 22–23). However, greater attention to the aspect of power (*dynamis*) can alert

⁹¹ Craig S. Keener, "Paul and the Corinthian Believers," in *The Blackwell Companion to Paul* (ed. Stephen Westerholm; Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011) 46–62, at 58–60.

⁹² Frank J. Matera, *II Corinthians: A Commentary* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003) 288.

⁹³ See the literature survey in Brock, "Theorizing Inclusion," 352–54; see also Yong, *The Bible*, 90–96; Brian Brock, *Wondrously Wounded: Theology, Disability, and the Body of Christ* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2019) 202–203; Dewey and Miller, "Paul," 393–95; Louise Gosbell, "A Disability Reading of Paul's 'Body of Christ' Metaphor," in *Romans and the Legacy of St Paul: Historical, Theological, and Social Perspectives* (ed. Peter G. Bolt and James R. Harrison; Macquarie Park, Australia: SCD, 2019) 281–335.

to difficulties in 1 Cor 12 from a disabilities perspective that the English-speaking disability discourse has overlooked.⁹⁴ Paul sandwiches the inclusive body parable by first introducing “the spiritual things” (vv. 1–11: activities that the Spirit brings about) and, at the end of the chapter, by situating these activities in the context of the church as the body of Christ (vv. 27–31). In the enclosing sections, Paul has more conspicuous demonstrations of “power” in mind, with repeated mention of acts of power (*dynamis*, miracles: vv. 10, 28, 29), but not of weakness. One term that stands out here is *charisma* (gift of the Spirit). Commentators have appealed to this term to appreciate contributions that people with disabilities make in congregations. Yet, of the five times that Paul uses *charisma*, he speaks of “gifts of healing” three times (vv. 9, 28, 30), not combining the noun with any particular “gift” elsewhere. Further, when Paul says that “through the Spirit,” some are given “faith” (12:9), apparently he thinks of the variety that “moves mountains” (13:2).⁹⁵

Paul’s focus on powerful deeds and healing calls to mind how the disability scholar Sharon Betcher has described New Testament passages that feature healing as “texts of terror.”⁹⁶ Too easily they take for granted that health is obviously desirable and disability a deficit. Moreover, in 11:30, Paul attributes weakness and illness to religious transgressions. When Paul speaks positively of acts of power but not of weakness (12:1–11, 27–31), a tension with his earlier praise of weakness and his criticism of the pursuit of strength (1:22–25) seems to result. It is only later on that Paul relativizes the flashier forms of power that he asserted in chapter 12 and gives them an inflection of weakness by highlighting love (13:1–3) and less spectacular gifts of the Spirit, such as acts of “upbuilding and encouragement and consolation” (14:1–4).

Paul’s more virile and ostentatious understanding of the “gifts of the Spirit” in 1 Cor 12 can contribute to a marginalization of people with disabilities. However, there is no need to highlight a theology of weakness in response, in which the contributions of people with disabilities consist especially in wearing weakness openly. Paul also asserts the significant role of the “weaker” members in his image of the body, in contrast to his praise of acts of power, and here he does not assert that everybody is weak by deploying a theology of the cross that would contrast the contempt of others by the “strong” with their lack of achievements before God. The contributions of “weak” members deserve respect, but, as Macaskill notes, the examples of the ears, the nose, the feet, and the private parts show that these contributions do not consist in weakness.⁹⁷

What did Paul have in mind with the contributions of the “weaker” members? Amos Yong suggests that the contributions of the “strong” are “mediated through

⁹⁴ Tilly, “Behinderung,” 70.

⁹⁵ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J., *First Corinthians* (AB; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008) 466.

⁹⁶ Sharon Betcher, “Disability and the Terror of the Miracle Tradition,” in *Miracles Revisited: New Testament Miracle Stories and Their Concepts of Reality* (ed. Stefan Alkier and Annette Weissenrieder; Berlin: de Gruyter, 2013) 161–81, at 165.

⁹⁷ Macaskill, “Autism and Biblical Studies,” 408.

those” of the weak,⁹⁸ but he does not go as far as to attribute strength to people with disabilities. Notably, Yong does not comment on “power” in 1 Cor 1–2. Rather, he continues to highlight a “theology of weakness,” although the contributions of the “weak” members (1 Cor 12) are not necessarily “weak.” By contrast, in an extended discussion of 1 Cor 12, Brian Brock helpfully illustrates the gifts that people with disabilities give to congregations with experiences he had with his son Adam, who has Down syndrome and other disabilities. Brian Brock sees Adam display a remarkable social sensitivity and solicitude, commenting, “it is easy to imagine that the intellectually disabled in a community may be the first to register the distress or spiritual state of those around them.”⁹⁹ Another illustration involves the way Adam sometimes frustrated his father’s expectations by showing no interest in material gifts. Adam appreciates embodied personal contact instead, which Brian suggests taught him a difficult but valuable lesson.¹⁰⁰ Further, Adam Brock contributes to an inclusive, albeit unconventional atmosphere at church, often sitting next to the priest and taking his socks off.¹⁰¹ On the whole, Brian Brock emphasizes that Christians should not disregard the work of the Spirit in the gifts that people with intellectual disabilities in fact give. In addition, the contrast between weakness and strength is not their point.¹⁰² Strengths come to the fore as Adam Brock engages in fellowship and helps include others in the community.

■ The Abilities and Achievements of People with Disabilities

The shift from an understanding of disability chiefly as weakness, which might imply strength in the sense that people with disabilities are a step ahead of others in accepting the vulnerabilities that characterize humanity in general, to an understanding of weakness that allows for distinctive strengths that are not themselves about weakness, resonates with a remark by Dietrich Bonhoeffer, even if that statement is one-sided in another way: “I should like to speak of God not at the boundaries but in the center, not in weakness but in strength; and therefore not in death and guilt but in man’s life and goodness”¹⁰³—and, I would add: not solely in apparent ability deficits but also in the achievements of people with disabilities.

In a lecture from 2019, Hauerwas deviates from his typical theology of weakness. Although he maintains that “God comes to us not in our strengths but in our weaknesses and vulnerabilities,”¹⁰⁴ he appreciates in this case how people with disabilities display “agency.” He presents an article by cultural anthropologist

⁹⁸ Yong, *The Bible*, 94.

⁹⁹ Brock, “Theorizing Inclusion,” 364.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 370.

¹⁰¹ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 222–23.

¹⁰² *Pace* *ibid.*, xiv–xv, 51; see Brock, “Theologizing Inclusion,” 352.

¹⁰³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (ed. John de Gruchy; trans. Isabel Best et al.; Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works 8, Minneapolis: Fortress, 2009) 366–67.

¹⁰⁴ Hauerwas, “To Be Befriended: A Meditation on Friendship and the Disabled,” *Church Life Journal*, 11 November 2019, <https://tinyurl.com/2p89446c>, sect. 2.

Patrick McKearney who, looking back at the time he spent at a L'Arche community, argues that "people with cognitive disabilities can contribute to and actively affect the moral lives of others in valuable ways, even as they may lack full cognitive capacity."¹⁰⁵ Among other things, these contributions may consist in the fact that carers learn about their own vulnerabilities. However, McKearney's main point is that the contributions by L'Arche core members who have disabilities are by no means restricted to giving carers a deeper knowledge of their own weakness. McKearney speaks of the remarkable "agency," the "distinctive characteristics, abilities and achievements" of core members.¹⁰⁶ It is not that their disabilities turned out to be less serious than assumed. McKearney's contribution suggests that disability should no longer be conceived of chiefly as weakness; rather, the constraints imposed by disability can also contribute to distinct capabilities.

McKearney further argues that anthropologists, philosophers, and theologians have allowed thinkers like Peter Singer to reinforce the binary of dependence and independence, and greater and lesser rationality, as a framework within which to view intellectual disabilities. While Singer denigrates more dependent people as less deserving of human dignity, thinkers like Eva F. Kittay or Reinders have responded with a care ethics, arguing for an appreciation of people with disabilities as highly valuable precisely while they are utterly "dependent, passive and vulnerable."¹⁰⁷ Yet, as stark as the difference in evaluation is, it is a secondary question that follows the binary of dependence and independence that guides the description of people.¹⁰⁸ Both sides agree about a zero-sum game: the less cognitively competent, strong, or independent people are, the weaker and more dependent they are, and vice-versa.

For McKearney, by contrast, weaknesses may enrich a community not only as weaknesses but also in allowing for distinct strengths. For example, three core members at L'Arche, Sarah, Rachel, and Martha, enjoy looking at themselves in the mirror, while their carers, who do not have what is called a disability, would not typically look at their reflection for an extended time.¹⁰⁹ McKearney describes the three as displaying agency in helpfully lacking a sensitivity to negative judgments by others based on conventional beauty standards or on conventional moral views about vanity. He affirms the common view that people considered intellectually disabled are less able to grasp "social norms and ethical ideals."¹¹⁰ While social norms are often important, here their reduced role has positive results, as the appreciation of one's beauty is not undermined by conventional modesty, which also helps carers to question conventional beauty norms. In another example, Ensy, who has a strong speech impairment and other disabilities, addresses a carer called Priya after having observed how Priya was sad earlier. Once Priya understood, she

¹⁰⁵ McKearney, "Receiving the Gift," 41; Hauerwas, "To Be Befriended."

¹⁰⁶ McKearney, "Receiving the Gift," 48.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 41.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 51–52.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 51.

was astonished, and McKearney considers Ensy's behavior an achievement. As another example of similar strengths, some residents at L'Arche take fellowship to profound levels with a remarkable ability to share simple yet meaningful bodily activities like being present to others at the right moment in the right way.¹¹¹ Vanier, moreover, appreciates how at L'Arche, people with disabilities dance on tables, and shared laughter breaks down social barriers.¹¹² Here, a reduced awareness of social norms again results in surprising personal strengths.

McKearney appreciates the Christian ethos of L'Arche that encourages friendships. Mainstream institutions discourage carers from making friends with disabled residents, in order to preserve their autonomy.¹¹³ By contrast, Vanier encouraged friendships due to his high theological regard for shared weakness. Alternatively, one can also interpret this policy in the sense that weaknesses shared in friendship allow for a sharing of strengths as well. Besides, an autonomy that would take place in the invulnerability of social isolation appears much less desirable by comparison.

Hauerwas implicitly acknowledges further distinct strengths of persons labeled disabled when he expresses great appreciation for his godson Adam Brock, who has autism and Down syndrome: "if the Kingdom brought by Jesus is *shalom* then Adam may be the healthiest person he [i.e., Adam's father Brian] knows. Adam is able to live without worry about the future."¹¹⁴ To plan for the future is another powerful social norm. Similarly, Brian Brock suggests that Adam displays an almost uncanny sensitivity in making visible unspoken social dynamics that elude others: Adam sometimes chooses a seat in relation to someone where others, beholden to social tensions that are difficult to read, avoid doing so. In keeping with previous examples, Brock highlights his son's defiance of "normal social convention."¹¹⁵ "Surely one cannot help but desire to have such a friend," Hauerwas concludes.

In his 2019 lecture, Hauerwas also implicitly addresses philosophical approaches to disability that he criticized earlier. His earlier criticism was that philosophical approaches may persuade people to respect the rights of people with disabilities, but they cannot motivate people to make friends with them.¹¹⁶ To do that, he argued, a positive Christian interpretation of weakness is required, which includes the testimony that people with disabilities give about universal human weakness before God. By contrast, when Hauerwas now says that friendships with people labeled disabled are so unconventional and enriching that one cannot but value them, he has modified that older account: a community consisting of people with and without disabilities can share both weaknesses and strengths, and here everybody has a

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 47, 50.

¹¹² Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, "The Politics of Gentleness: An Interview with Jean Vanier and Stanley Hauerwas," *Sojourners* 38 (2009) 24–30, at 29.

¹¹³ McKearney, "Receiving the Gift," 44.

¹¹⁴ Hauerwas, "To Be Befriended," sect. 3.

¹¹⁵ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 164.

¹¹⁶ Hauerwas and Vanier, *Living Gently*, 90, 93.

valuable, attractive gift to give. It is not as if only Christians would value the positive traits of people with disabilities—which are no longer reduced to weakness—for reasons that would require distinct religious commitments. However, as long as stereotypes about disabilities circulate widely, such friendships should hopefully be a hallmark precisely of Christian communities.

■ An Anthropology of Intercorporeality

For McKearney, the deficits in linguistic competence and rationality among L'Arche residents are clear. Yet their disabilities also go together with different strengths than mainstream society would expect. McKearney recounts how carers at L'Arche were amazed at the ability of core members to read the emotional states of carers and to empathize.¹¹⁷ McKearney calls the achievements by people with disabilities “distinct” and remarkable. He relates how people with intellectual disabilities do not have the cognitive abilities of their carers but often excel in matters of temperament, like “humour, generosity or assertiveness.”¹¹⁸ I suggest such strengths reflect the power of the gospel with their “community-forming power.”

As remarked, Garland-Thomson criticized unwarranted, stereotypical generalizations about people with disabilities as “a colonizing move” vis-à-vis some putative “noble savage.” The same objection could be raised against examples of strengths in people with disabilities: there is no supernatural mystery that would endow people with disabilities with nebulous capabilities and strengths. For this reason, Mitchell and Snyder use the ironic term “supercrrips,” warning that apparently “positive images” of people with disabilities may not be so positive after all.¹¹⁹ To portray people with disabilities as supernaturally talented would again be a problematic “narrative prosthesis” that subjects people with disabilities to the discursive power of a theological scheme.

To defuse this concern, anthropological insights from the philosophy of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908–1961) are helpful. Discussion of his work in disability studies is just beginning,¹²⁰ but occasionally authors emphasize how Merleau-Ponty's understanding of the fundamentally embodied condition of being in the world suggests that people with impairments have their own integrity, in resourcefully generating meaning in their own embodied ways. Swinton faults a “hypercognitive society” for discrimination against people with intellectual disabilities.¹²¹ A philosophy of embodiment helps analyze with greater precision how the value society attaches to cognition is excessive.

¹¹⁷ McKearney, “Receiving the Gift,” 49.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 49.

¹¹⁹ Mitchell and Snyder, *Narrative Prosthesis*, 25, 23.

¹²⁰ Gail Weiss, “The ‘Normal Abnormalities’ of Disability and Aging: Merleau-Ponty and Beauvoir,” in *Feminist Phenomenology Futures* (ed. Helen Fielding and Dorothea Olkowski; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017) 203–17, at 211.

¹²¹ John Swinton, “Introduction: Hauerwas on Disability,” in *Critical Reflections* (ed. Swinton) 1–9, at 6.

Merleau-Ponty understands any experience of the world as the result of the subject's embodied negotiation of the environment. There is no disembodied Cartesian mind that would provide an objective framework according to which the organism would understand and evaluate its situation in the world. For example, "number blind" people understand numbers only as parts of a sequence they say out loud, not as determinate amounts. They may not see that in the term $5 + 4 - 4$ the fours cancel each other out. Nevertheless, they can carry out computations by counting and so should not be considered deficient with regard to some direct, mental awareness of numbers.¹²² As philosopher Philipa Rothfield suggests, the way a person with an impairment experiences the world "is not to be thought of as 'normal' minus some capacity."¹²³ For Merleau-Ponty, disability is not an original fact here but is experienced only when people with disabilities "see themselves through the eyes of others."¹²⁴ Since originally, embodied life experiences the environment in relation to the self and significant others,¹²⁵ but not to some general, disembodied standard, Merleau-Ponty concludes that "disorders that are properly intellectual . . . will not be able to be considered as ultimate deficiencies."¹²⁶

The original fact is that of embodied sense perception, with which the lived body finds its way in the world, even before the person becomes aware of it. This contrasts with the common representationalist view that sees the subject fundamentally engaged with ideas, images, symbols, concepts, or propositions, which would then need to be brought into conformity with an objective "view from nowhere." Representationalism has a powerful grasp on public discourse, for example in cognitive science,¹²⁷ but it has been influential in theology, too.¹²⁸ In that view, people with intellectual disabilities would be held back fundamentally by a basic deficit in their ability to process representations. Merleau-Ponty, by contrast, contends that at bottom, perception as a thoroughly bodily event does not depend on mental representation.¹²⁹ "When we say that the perceived thing is grasped 'in person' or 'in the flesh' (*leibhafti*), this is to be taken literally: the flesh of what is

¹²² Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (trans. D. Landes; London: Routledge, 2012) 135.

¹²³ Philipa Rothfield, "Living Well and Health Studies," in *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts* (ed. Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds; London: Routledge, 2014) 218–27, at 222.

¹²⁴ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 458.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 371.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 135.

¹²⁷ Thomas Fuchs, *Ecology of the Brain: The Phenomenology and Biology of the Embodied Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018) 3–8.

¹²⁸ See, for example, Simon Hewitt, "Herbert McCabe on God and Humanity," *NBf* 102 (2021) 815–33, at 824.

¹²⁹ Charles Taylor, "Merleau-Ponty and the Epistemological Picture," in *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (ed. Taylor Carman and Mark Hansen; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) 26–49.

perceived, this compact particle which stops exploration, and this optimum which terminates it, all reflect my own incarnation and are its counterpart.”¹³⁰

Joshua St. Pierre is an example of a disability scholar who relies on Merleau-Ponty’s interpretation of the mind as not operating in a Cartesian realm but as fundamentally intertwined with the bodily organism, in separation from which it cannot be conceptualized. This helps him understand stuttering as resulting from the body’s experience of time that differs from the dominant mainstream experience, rather than as a deficiency of “pure consciousness.”¹³¹ St. Pierre then criticizes Merleau-Ponty for failing to take individual differences in the embodied experience of time into account, while, ironically, Merleau-Ponty’s rejection of a Cartesian standard time allows for precisely that.

Merleau-Ponty further argues that the recognition of a person as a person does not rest on induction: person A does not infer in a logical operation that person B is an intentional agent, in analogy to A’s own personhood, as evidenced in shared bodily movement. Both share their being in a pre-theoretical, “primordial *We [On]*”¹³² that Merleau-Ponty calls intercorporeality. Already as newborns, babies are actively engaged with their caregivers, and their experience is not one of private individuals but of a joint exploration of the world from not yet differentiated perspectives.¹³³ Due to this shared condition, A perceives B at once as a body and a person, just as I perceive my left hand as a living organ when I touch it with my right hand.¹³⁴ Here, Merleau-Ponty also speaks of “*Einführung*”¹³⁵ (empathy). *Einführung* should not be misunderstood in the colloquial sense of a strong emotion that does not touch on the more basic perceptual constitution of the other as an intentional agent.¹³⁶ For Merleau-Ponty, the basic nature of bodily sociality defuses the philosophical problem of solipsism, but his observations also suggest that a fundamentally bodily, perceptual openness to others is not surprising, regardless of reduced rational capacities. Shaun Gallagher comments: “in encounters with others, pronoetically, before I know it, I seem to have a sense of how it is with them.”¹³⁷

Merleau-Ponty’s notion of intercorporeality helps spell out the key concept that this article derived from Paul’s theology, which is the particular strengths of people with certain disabilities. For example, when McKearney recounts how Sarah, Rachel, and Martha appreciate seeing their own bodies in the mirror, such appreciation of

¹³⁰ Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher and His Shadow,” in *Signs* (trans. R. McCleary; Northwestern University Studies in Phenomenology and Existential Philosophy; Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1967) 159–81, at 167.

¹³¹ Joshua St. Pierre, “Distending Straight-Masculine Time: A Phenomenology of the Disabled Speaking Body,” *Hypatia* 30 (2015) 49–65, at 51–53.

¹³² Merleau-Ponty, “The Philosopher,” 175.

¹³³ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 124.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 169–72.

¹³⁶ Dan Zahavi, *Phenomenology: The Basics* (London: Routledge, 2018) 92.

¹³⁷ Shaun Gallagher, *How the Body Shapes the Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) 237.

their embodied existence may illustrate a prerequisite of intercorporeal competence. I would add to McKearney's account that perhaps the glee the three display at what they see suggests that they take pleasure in their embodied agency as their specific strength. Methodologically, intercorporeality seems uniquely suited to spell out the strengths of people with intellectual disabilities. By contrast, to search for verbal accounts in which people with intellectual disabilities describe their achievements themselves may at times be self-defeating, given the intellectual prerequisites of such an effort.

McKearney comments on the remarkable competence with which people with disabilities console others by spending time with them in basic embodied ways. Priya's astonishment about Ensy's perception of her sadness likewise illustrates Ensy's intercorporeal competence. Adam Brock's preference for the embodied encounter with his father over lifeless material gifts shows a preference for the intercorporeal dimension, and that may be the factor that further prompts his father to attribute great sensitivity and solicitude to Adam. Intercorporeality does not mean that people with disabilities are especially empathic, in the colloquial sense of the term. Moreover, there may also be disabilities that reduce intercorporeal competence. Nevertheless, intellectual disabilities do not necessarily hamper a person's awareness of the emotional state of another, which does not rest on processing representations. Merleau-Ponty's concept of intercorporeality even helps us understand one strength of people with intellectual disabilities. Brock speaks of a "sympathetic connection with other Christians," which he attributes to people with intellectual disabilities.¹³⁸

■ Reduced Social Convention as an Intercorporeal Strength in Weakness

In keeping with the critique of representationalism, people often perceive, rather than infer, more elaborate aspects of how the other person experiences the world. Ludwig Wittgenstein observes that people do not read facial expressions through inductive reasoning.¹³⁹ Merleau-Ponty is aware that A's perception may misunderstand B: A remains "on this side" of B's experience, rather than encompassing it.¹⁴⁰ A person's more elaborate experience, expressed in posture or facial expression, is not perceived directly; more precariously, it is perceived only as a "trace" left in that "original," more fundamental reality of the other person.¹⁴¹

When Merleau-Ponty describes a person's experience as a "trace" that we perceive, but not as a positive presence, he pursues an alternative both to the direct

¹³⁸ Brock, *Wondrously Wounded*, 212.

¹³⁹ Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* (vol. 2 of 2; ed. G. von Wright; trans. C. Luckhardt; Oxford: Blackwell, 1980) 100. This may not be true for people with certain forms of ASD.

¹⁴⁰ Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology*, 171–72.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 172.

perception of their experience itself and a processing of representations. Yet his metaphor also draws attention to the fact that a person's experience can well be missed. At this point, I suggest that people can overlook a person's experience more easily the more they are shaped by social convention. Those with a clear sense of social norms may pay less attention to the person in front of them, more concerned not to arrive late somewhere else, focused on some practical task at hand, or worrying about the future. In the various accounts about people with intellectual disabilities, a reduced internalization of social norms has been a continuing theme. It can be conducive to greater attentiveness to other people. For example, Adam Brock's taking his socks off at church shows a reduced sense of social norms, but his father also credits him with a remarkable sensitivity to the needs of others. Such sensitivity can be a sign specifically of intercorporeal competence. Here, reduced attention to social norms can imply greater intercorporeal competence, as attention to social norms may otherwise override the perception of a "trace" in the other person's bodily expressivity.

Charles Taylor describes the modern ideal of the "buffered self," which separates inner emotion from outer bodily expression.¹⁴² As this modern habitus became a cultural norm, individuals have been discouraged not only from showing emotions themselves but also from becoming too personal by addressing others about the emotions that they display. The "flow of feeling" that transports mutual recognition between a young person and significant others runs dry as the young person matures and becomes increasingly detached and "buffered."¹⁴³ A buffered self would also notice the emotions of others less. It follows that nondisabled people may perceive another person's emotional expressions less clearly because, as second nature, social convention has reduced their intercorporeal perception.

This does not suggest that the nondisabled, mainstream way of life, permeated by social conventions, is less desirable morally than a life with disabilities. Social norms of course play an important, often helpful role in communities. Nevertheless, social norms and mainstream rationality are not unalloyed goods. Greater rational capacities do not represent simple moral progress. Rather, in people less rationally competent, other valuable intercorporeal capacities can be more developed as a trade-off.

■ Conclusion

I have argued for an account of intellectual disability that encourages the discovery of strengths and gifts that are distinctive of weakness, in contrast to a view in which weakness dominates solely. In a theological interpretation of disabilities, Hauerwas has made the influential argument that those with disabilities help others acknowledge their vulnerabilities. However, that view can easily amount to an illegitimate "narrative prosthesis" (Mitchell and Snyder) or "a colonizing move

¹⁴² Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) 39, 141.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 137.

that turns the disabled subject into a sacred version of the noble savage figure” (Garland-Thomson) and does not encourage the cultivation of the talents or interests that people with disabilities may have. Instead, this article argues that, along with weaknesses, people with disabilities also have distinct strengths that should be appreciated theologically.

I have developed this view in dialogue with Paul’s theology of the cross, which is not solely focused on human weakness and God’s grace but which includes the aspect of Christ’s power in weakness, which Paul sees reflected in his physical afflictions. Likewise, Christ’s power is reflected in Paul’s less impressive oral performance and the less reputable figures in the Corinthian congregation. I have highlighted this as the “community-forming” power of weakness.

Allies of people with disabilities repeatedly ascribe to them community-forming powers as well, as they take relationships to profound levels or demonstrate unconventional but positive ways of life. These episodes are firmly rooted in distinctly Christian contexts. However, in these observations, there is no mysterious, supernatural aspect to these strengths that would be artificially imposed on people with disabilities. Rather, Merleau-Ponty’s concept of intercorporeality helps spell out certain strengths in weakness. I have further suggested that the social conventions of the “buffered self” can eclipse intercorporeal perception in people without disabilities, while the behavior of people with intellectual disabilities is less shaped by social norms and thus more sensitive to the bodily perception of other people’s emotions. That does not mean that intellectual disability is more desirable than nondisability, however. Since social norms are ambiguous, their reduced internalization is not inherently positive, nor does their maximum internalization mean unfettered progress. People with disabilities have different strengths than those who do not have disabilities, some of which are germane to their condition.