

Disability and the Theodicy of Defeat

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Abstract: Marilyn McCord Adams argues that God's goodness to individuals requires God to defeat horrendous evils; it is not enough for God to outweigh these evils through compensatory goods. On her view, God defeats the evils experienced by an individual if and only if God's goodness to the individual enables her to integrate the evil organically into a unified life story she perceives as good and meaningful. In this essay, we seek to apply Adams's theodicy of defeat to a particular form of suffering. We argue that God's goodness to individuals requires that God defeat the suffering to which a range of disabilities can give rise.

1. Introduction

The problem of horrendous evils is a substantive challenge to the rationality of theistic belief.¹ Proponents of this argument take as basic the fact that there are horrendous evils—that is, evils the participation in which produces suffering of a sort that destroys a person's sense that her life, on the whole, is good or worthwhile to herself. Given the complete degradation of a person's capacity for discovering or constructing meaning from her experience of suffering, it is not clear the common theodicies will adequately address the presence of these evils. To say that these evils are instrumental to some greater good, or a necessary part of some greater providential order, or that they can be produce mature states of character demonstrates a failure to appreciate the demoralizing quality of the suffering produced by horrendous evil. To claim that our minds are incapable of grasping the reasons available to God for permitting these kinds of evils is to suggest that permitting the complete fragmentation of a person's psyche is consistent with God's goodness to the person—that is, consistent with God showing loving concern for the individual. Given the existence of horrendous evils, it is not clear how a theist can

¹ For a forceful articulation of this problem, and one which frames how we approach the issue in the present paper, see Adams (1999).

maintain that it is reasonable to believe that there is a God who demonstrates perfect love in showing goodness to each individual.

Marilyn McCord Adams argues that God's goodness to individuals requires God to defeat horrendous evils; it is not enough for God to outweigh these evils through compensatory goods. On her view, God defeats the evils experienced by an individual if and only if God's goodness to the individual enables her to integrate the evil into an understanding of her life she can construe as good and meaningful. Adams points to some experiences that might be sufficient to defeat horrendous evil, including: (i) the deep meaning one may derive from the experience of identifying with Jesus's suffering and (ii) the experience of receiving God's gratitude for her endurance of extreme suffering. Adams maintains that valuing the person as an individual requires God to "defeat any horrendous evil in which s/he participated by giving it positive meaning through organic unity with a great enough good within the context of his/her life" (1999, 31).

In this essay, we employ Adams's theodicy of defeat to address the suffering attending some forms of disability.² Amos Yong (2009) has argued, rightly in our minds, that there needs to be more work on the overlap of disability studies and philosophy of religion. Such work, he argues, is "long overdue, as disability perspectives have been noticeably absent in even the most recent discussions in the philosophy of religion" (54).³ We focus on the experience of suffering to which a range of disabilities can give rise and we argue that God's goodness requires God to defeat this suffering. Finally, we offer some initial but tentative thoughts on ways God can demonstrate goodness to individuals whose disabilities cause these forms of suffering. Our discussion offers a framework for thinking about the ways in which their suffering may be defeated.⁴

² There is some overlap between the issues we discuss and Mizrahi's (2014) articulation of a new evidential problem of evil which takes the unequal distribution of natural endowments as its central evidence against the existence of a perfectly loving God. Mizrahi's essay, however, does not engage with Adams's theodicy of defeat and is not concerned with the suffering attending some forms of disability. For these reasons, we do not address the issues he raises in his work.

³ Yong contends that the needed interaction needs to go in both directions: philosophers of religion need to take insights from disability studies seriously and philosophy of disability seriously and philosophers reflecting on disability need to address topics in philosophy of religion (2009, 55).

⁴ We are all too aware of two dangers of our task. The first concerns the great harm that has been done to those with disabilities by others who claim to speak for them. The history of treatment of those with disabilities in the United States, for instance, is replete with examples sufficient to cause much sorrow. Second, theodicies have sometimes been given that are themselves instances of further harm to individuals whose sufferings they claim to explain. Both of these dangers come together in using terminology such as 'evil' in discussions of disability, particularly given the severe social marginalization of those with disabilities. Yong writes that "one of the 'evils' of theodicy has been the ignorance, neglect, and marginalization of disability voices" (2009, 70). We're trying to help correct that lacuna. But in doing so, we are trying to follow a principle similar to Rabbi Greenberg's advice concerning theodicies of the Holocaust. Greenberg (1977) holds that one ought advance as a theodicy "no statement ... that could not be made in the presence of the burning children [killed in the Holocaust]" (34). Similarly, in our reflections, we seek to avoid contributing to any additional harm of the disabled. We are both parents of sons who have experienced difficulties attending disability. Aaron's son, Samuel, was born with Trisomy 18 along with a constellation of other congenital abnormalities; he lived a few short hours before his death. Kevin's son, Jameson, has 2p15-16.1 microdeletion syndrome, a syndrome that results in fine and gross motor difficulties, developmental

The structure of this paper is as follows. In section 2, we offer a full sketch of Adams's theodicy of defeat, focusing attention on her account of God's *goodness to* individual persons. In section 3, we review some important debates in the literature on disability. Drawing on Elizabeth Barnes's important work, we distinguish between (i) *mere-difference* disabilities, or conditions that are bad for a person only because of disabling social structures, and (ii) *bad-difference* disabilities, or conditions the possession of which would be objectively bad for the person even if she lived in ideal social circumstances. We conclude this section by proposing the following conditional claim: *if* there are *bad-difference* disabilities, then God's goodness requires that God defeat the suffering attending these disabilities.⁵ In section 4, we offer a provisional account of some of the ways God may defeat this suffering. Our aim in this paper is not to defend Adams's theodicy of defeat; rather, we seek to apply her insights to address a form of suffering that has received little attention in the literature.

2. Adams and the Defeat of Horrendous Evils

Adams's insightful work on theodicy shows that defeat is crucial to providing an adequate response to the problem of horrendous evil.⁶ Her treatment of the defeat of evil draws on Roderick Chisholm's (1968) presidential address for the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. At the heart of Chisholm's presentation is a distinction between what he calls between 'balancing off' and 'defeating':

It is one thing to say that the goodness—the intrinsic goodness—of a certain situation is *balanced off* by means of some other situation; and

and intellectual disabilities, significant splintering of various skills, and low sensory recognition and integration. Jameson's condition is discussed at greater length in Timpe 2016. In what follows, we have been very careful to say nothing about disability that we would not say directly to, or about, our sons. We are nevertheless aware that our good intentions do not entail our success on this score.

⁵ For those that think that all disabilities involve only *mere-difference*, this conditional will be trivially true insofar as its antecedent is false. We, however, don't think this conditional is trivially true.

⁶ There is a lot in her work on this subject that we aren't able to address or incorporate in what follows. Most importantly, we will not be addressing the following two issues. First, Adams specifically addresses *horrendous* evils and not evils *simpliciter*. Since we are not claiming that all disabilities are horrendous evils but only that some produce suffering that must be defeated, we need not address this central element of Adams's larger work. Second, Adams (2003) follows a number of medieval figures in rejecting (i) that God is a moral agent, (ii) that God is a member of our moral community, and (iii) that God has any obligations towards us (13–17). Even if these claims are true, there is a way of reconstructing the problem of evil without these commitments. Adams writes, "Without having obligations to created persons, God has nevertheless engaged in certain relationships that have raised expectations that God will be good to created persons.... Horror participation constitutes *prima facie* reason to believe that God hates us, that God is cruel, that God is a dead-beat deity (cf. Jesus' cry of dereliction, 'my God, my God, why have You forsaken me?') and a treacherous friend (cf. Jobs' complaints). Horrors stick with God, not because God is *obligated*, but because God *intends* to follow through on God's relationship initiatives" (17). Because the problem of evil thus arises whether or not (i)–(iii) above are true, we need not engage those claims here for purposes of this paper.

it is quite another thing to say that the goodness of a certain situation is *defeated* by means of some other situation. Again, it is one thing to say that the evil—the intrinsic badness—of a certain situation is balanced off by means of some other situation; and it is quite another thing to say that the evil of a certain situation is defeated by means of some other situation. (21)

Chisholm ties this concept of defeat explicitly to the problem of evil: “It is also clear, I think, that the theodist *must* appeal to the concept of defeat—that he can deal with the problem of evil *only* by saying that the evils in the world are defeated in the sense that I have tried to describe” (37).

Building upon Chisholm’s suggestive comments, Adams makes the defeat of evil a central element in her reply to the logical problem of horrendous evils. Horrendous evils are “evils the participation in which (that is, the doing or suffering or which) constitutes *prima facie* reason to doubt whether the participant’s life could (given their inclusion in it) be a great good to him/her on the whole” (1999, 26).⁷ These forms of evil threaten the ability for a person to experience her life as meaningful, or as somehow good for her. Horrendous evils are so damaging that they can permanently fracture a person’s capacity for valuing her life, or for seeing her life as valuable. Given their impact, Adams believes that it is not enough for the sufferer to experience overwhelming goods that might balance off the participation in horrendous evils. Rather, God’s perfect goodness implies that God will defeat the experience of horrendous evil in the person’s life.

Adams contrasts balancing-off (or being outweighed by) with defeat in the following way:

The balancing-off relation is arithmetical and additive: value-parts are balanced off within a larger whole if other parts of opposite value equal or outweigh them. Alternatively, value-parts may be integrated into a whole to which they bear (in Moore’s words) ‘no regular proportion’ via relations of ‘organic unity’. In these later cases, not only may the whole have a different value from the part, but also ... *a significantly smaller, negatively (or positively) valued part can contribute to a greater overall positive (or negative) value in the whole*; in which case (to borrow Chisholm’s label) the negative (or positive) value of the part may be said to be ‘defeated’ within the whole.⁸ (1999, 21)

More recently, Adams has put her rejection of balancing off or outweighing another way. We might think that a particular good outweighs an evil if the evil is required for the realization of that good (or to prevent a greater evil). But to think of God as weighing such goods, for Adams, is to get the solution to the problem wrong:

⁷ Adams acknowledges that there is a plethora of *problems* of evil, but she seeks to address the logical problem of horrendous evils specifically.

⁸ Adams’s definition of the distinction differs from Chisholm’s in that, while for Chisholm, defeat and outweighing are exclusive, for Adams they are not.

What tips theodicies and defenses over into the outrageous is the idea that these goals are what render horror permission compatible with perfect goodness, or, more narrowly, with divine goodness to created persons. Happily, what is *primarily* at stake between God and created persons is not whether the reasons on which God acts were 'good and sufficient' by instrumentalist or other criteria. Rather, what we want to know is whether God is *for* us or *against* us. (2013, 19)

The primary question that needs to be addressed regarding evil is not whether God permits certain evils for the sake of some other goals, but whether God is *good to* particular agents—that is, how God demonstrates to the person that God is for them rather than against them. The fact that there are goals served by the permission of evil is not sufficient, by itself, to show that God is being good to the individual involved in the suffering. One way to demonstrate that God is indeed for the person is to defeat those evils that lead her to question the meaningfulness of her life.⁹

Adams argues that the goodness of God requires this kind of goodness to agents who are subject to horrendous evils. God's perfect goodness not only requires that any evils experienced are outweighed, but that they are defeated:

My notion is that reasons to doubt [the goodness of God] can be outweighed, if the evil *e* can be defeated. The evil *e* can be defeated if it can be included in some good-enough whole to which it bears a relation of organic (rather than merely additive) unity; *e* is defeated within the context of the individual's life if the individual's life is a good whole to which *e* bears the relevant organic unity.¹⁰ (1999, 28)

The 'organic' metaphor is important for Adams's view of the way that divine goodness requires defeat and not just balancing off. For Adams, "harms are not atomistic, their cumulative effect not simply additive" (1999, 40). Even if each individual evil could

⁹ An anonymous referee raises this question: does it matter if the sufferer is in fact so questioning her life? Or is the suffering itself sufficient such that she should question the meaningfulness of her life? We maintain that there is an ambiguity in Adams's account concerning this question of meaning. And to the extent that we are employing Adam's account, our discussion inherits this ambiguity. But we offer this as a provisional response. Suppose that the person thinks her suffering gives her reason to question the meaning of her life. Either she ought to think this or not. If she ought, then what we say in the remainder of this paper would offer resources to address this kind of suffering. If, however, she ought not think that this suffering is sufficient reason to question the meaning but she (mistakenly) thinks it does, then there is still something that she is suffering—namely the false thought that her suffering is good reason to question the meaning of her life. Let's call this suffering *Y*. Now *Y* needs to be defeated. How? According to the account we are articulating and employing below.

¹⁰ Later in the same book she writes: "I have forwarded, as criterial for solving the problem of horrendous evils, the idea that God guarantees to created lives that are great goods to them on the whole (in which goods at least overbalance evils by a wide margin) and in which participation in horrors is defeated within the context of the individual's life" (149). A similar view concerning the redemption of suffering can be found in Stump (2010). There are a number of important similarities between Stump's view and Adams's on the defeat of suffering, though we're not able to explore them in the present context.

be balanced off when taken individually, that would not be sufficient to ensure that a life as a whole wouldn't raise reasons to doubt the existence or goodness of God.

If God is to be truly good to particular agents, merely outweighing or balancing off participation in horrendous evils will be insufficient to address these evils. Balancing off or outweighing evil will not enable the person to integrate the experience into her estimation of the goodness of her life. Merely swamping the evil by adding some overwhelmingly good experience to a person's life does not enable the person to fashion from the experience of affliction something essential to the value of her life. Only the *defeat* of evil allows the person to fold her experience of horrendous evil into a life story the parts of which she would not wish away in spite of their horror. Consider two soldiers, Ralph and Sam, whose experience in war involved participation in horrendous evil but who see the friendship forged in the trenches as partly constitutive of the meaning of their lives. She writes,

Participating in horrors together is not necessary for human friendships. They did not go to war as a means to the end of making friends. Ralph and Sam would not have enlisted had they known in advance how bad it would be. They would never want to go through such horrors again. But because their experience in the trenches has been caught up into one of their most valuable human relationships, they do not retrospectively wish it away from their lives.¹¹ (2013, 20)

Outweighing evil may allow persons to say that the balance of their lives was good, but they would continue to see their participation in horrendous evils as something detracting from the significance of their lives. It is not that the defeat of horrendous evils changes the potentially ruinous features of the experience; those experiences are still truly evil. Instead, defeat enables persons to incorporate their afflictions into a unified story the parts of which contribute to the experience of their life as good for them. They can truthfully say that their experiences of horrendous evil were awful and of a sort that they should never have had to endure, but that they are an element in their lives essential to their understanding of the value or meaning of their lives.

For Adams, the defeat of evil requires the ability to fashion meaning of just this sort. She asks us to consider the following question:

What would it take for Divine power and agency to be able to guarantee created persons lives that are great goods to them on the whole, and to defeat their participation in horrors not just globally, but within their individual lives? (1999, 80)

An acceptable answer to this question must involve those evils (or horrors) contributing organically to a life of meaning that as an organic whole defeats those evils (or horrors). As she puts the point more recently, "God is good to a created

¹¹ Jim Sterba objects to this particular example on the grounds that Ralph's and Sam's experiences could only be described as above if the war they are involved in was just. We need not adjudicate this issue at present for our use of the example in explicating Adams's view.

person if and only if God guarantees to him/her a life that is a great good to him/her on the whole and in the end and defeats any individual horror participation within the frame of that individual's life" (2013), 19). It is precisely because of the way that evils (specifically horrendous evils) can destroy people's meaning that they are such a challenge to the goodness of God: "horrors afflict persons insofar as they are actual or potential meaning-makers" (1999, 28).

Adams's distinction between actual and potential meaning-makers marks the difference between (i) those with immediately exercisable capacities for making meaning of their lives and (ii) those whose capacities for meaning-making have not yet developed. Most importantly, she contends that powers for self-consciousness and "transtemporal psychic unity" seem to be crucial for participation in horrendous evils. Adams contends that most human beings are, at least, potential meaning-makers. The exceptions she countenances are those individuals who are "severely brain deficient" (1999, 28).¹² Although we will not dwell on this distinction here, below we contend that there may be ways *post mortem* for God to heal those affected by significant cognitive impairment such that individuals with what Adams would call severe brain deficiency may be able to exercise the endowments proper to their nature. If this is true, then these individuals may possess the capacities to fashion meaning from the lives they have lived. If one endorses this amendment to Adams's analysis, one could defend a more inclusive picture such that all humans, regardless of their currently exercisable capacities, are potential meaning-makers.¹³

According to Adams, actual and potential meaning-makers are the only subjects who can suffer horrendous evils. And God's goodness to those who suffer requires more than the mere provision of a good that objectively defeats this evil. Adams differentiates between two aspects of meaning, one objective and one subjective (she also uses the term 'recognized'): "We may thus distinguish between *objective* and *recognized* meaning, so that relation to some great enough good might objectively defeat evil within the context of an individual's life without their knowing about those connections" (1999, 81).¹⁴ The defeat of horrendous evils requires a

¹² In a pair of interesting papers, Andrew Chignell raises concerns about Adams's approach for infants (1998 and 2001). At the heart of his concern, however, is the claim that suffering horrendously "involves certain sophisticated cognitive abilities—abilities to see oneself as degraded, as reduced to one's biology, as living a meaningless life, as being treated like something sub-personal, and so forth. Infants lack such sophisticated abilities" (2001, 477). Chignell continues, "...the capacity to suffer horrendously (in the technical sense) and the capacity to have one's suffering defeated come as a package: both capacities involve the sophisticated meaning-making abilities that infants lack. If a victim of suffering lacks these abilities, then (sadly) her suffering cannot be defeated, but (happily) it also cannot be horrendous" (478). This is obviously related to our present project in that some of the *bad-difference* disabilities involve the lack of the required cognitive abilities. There is much in these papers that is worth exploration, though we cannot do that here. Even if Chignell is correct, in the present paper we are attempting to provide for the defeat of the suffering involved with *bad-difference* disabilities, and not just the *horrendous* suffering therein. We maintain that there is suffering for which defeat is necessary even if this suffering is not an instance of horrendous evil.

¹³ Likewise, one might argue that non-human animals are also potential meaning-makers. We do not explore this extension of Adams's view in the present paper. For a recent exploration of the problem of animal pain and theodicy, see Dougherty 2014.

¹⁴ Adams further differentiates two ways meaning might be recognized: "Again, there is a difference between *seeing* connections and *valuing* them.... So, too, there is a difference between meanings

goodness to the agent that satisfies both objective and subjective, or recognized, meaning. What is good *for* a person, on Adams's view, is objective because "what is good *for* a person is for him/her to be appropriately related to great enough goods" (82). But this objective element won't be sufficient to defeat evil if the person is not able to recognize that objective meaning. This is why she thinks that defeat requires the individual involved to "recognize and appropriate at least some of these positive meanings" (82).¹⁵

Defeat of horrendous evils will require a person's ability to understand her suffering as being enfolded within a life story she construes as good for her. The experience of the beatific vision, or of receiving God's gratitude for her suffering, or of being cared for by a community of love can defeat one's doubts about the value of one's life. Perhaps most importantly, participants in horrendous suffering may come to identify their own suffering with the suffering of Jesus who became incarnate and subjected himself to horrendous suffering. By fully identifying with the human experience of horrors, Jesus offers a way for sufferers to identify their own experience of horror with his suffering. In the same way that relationships forged in the midst of the horrors can become central to the meaning of a person's life, the person whose horrendous suffering becomes entangled with the goodness of God in Christ can come to experience her life as meaningful because of this relationship with God. In this respect, however awful the horrors, the person can come to see her affliction as being bound up in a life that is beautiful and meaningful in part because of her affliction. She would not wish the experience away because God has been good to her—that is, God has demonstrated that God is for her. It is this goodness that defeats the evils that God has permitted in her life.

3. Disabilities: *Mere-Difference* or *Bad-Difference*?

Although Adams's account of defeat is tailored to address the problem of horrendous evil, we assume that defeat is also important for other forms of suffering. We maintain that any suffering that is potentially ruinous—that is, any suffering that can undermine a person's estimation of the meaning or value of the person's life—needs to be defeated. God's goodness to individuals requires more than merely balancing certain evils such that their lives are good on the whole; it requires that God will be good to individuals by defeating any suffering that threatens to leave them completely fractured. In this section, we draw on the literature in the philosophy of disability to maintain that there are disabilities that constitute a threat of this kind to individuals. Hence, a good God must work to defeat the suffering to which these disabilities give

being realized and appropriated *by others* and their being recognized and appropriated *by the individual him/herself*" (1999, 81). Defeat, she argues, requires both objective meaning and subjective meaning that is realized by the individual herself.

¹⁵ Both Stump 2010 and Wolterstorff 2001 argue that the goods to which a theodicy appeals must be goods for the individuals who suffer. For additional discussion, see Fales 2013. For a worry about theodicies according to which the individual is treated as a means to the good of another (or others), see Trakakis 2013, particularly 370ff.

rise. But before we can construct this argument, a bit of an overview of some issues in philosophy of disability is needed.¹⁶

There are two debates in the philosophical literature relevant to the central questions of this paper. The first debate concerns whether disability is best construed in terms of conditions of an individual person or the larger social structure in which a person lives. And often, philosophers frame this debate as a choice between (i) a medical model of disability, according to which disabilities are conditions of a person which deviate from typical human functioning and, for this reason alone, harm or disadvantage the person, and (ii) a social model of disability, according to which conditions of the person that differ from typical human functioning are harmful or disadvantageous only because of the disabling social structures in which the person lives.¹⁷ As Rudnick (2014) observes, “the medical model of disability views disability as caused by personal impairment, such as an internally caused genetic defect or an externally caused physical injury, whereas the social model of disability views disability as caused by society’s not accommodating the needs of people with such challenges” (106).¹⁸

These two models do not exhaust the range of models one might propose to define disability. Kahane and Savulescu (2009, 2011) have developed a welfare model of disability according to which a “person’s biology or psychology is a disability if that state makes it more likely that a person’s life will get worse, in terms of his or her own wellbeing, in a given set of social and environmental circumstances” (2009). This model seeks to offer a middle way between the medical and social models. Like the social model, it acknowledges that ways in which one’s social environment can adversely affect the person. Conditions that might be neutral in terms of their effects on a person’s well-being can be detrimental to a person’s welfare in social

¹⁶ Much of the philosophical literature on disability seems to endorse, even if unreflectively and only implicitly, the presupposition that all disabilities share a certain commonality (or set of commonalities) in virtue of which they are, in fact, disabilities. In other words, many accept the view that there is a set of necessarily and jointly sufficient conditions all disabilities satisfy. We reject this view and in what follows we assume that disabilities are related by family resemblance, though the boundaries of that resemblance are often unclear and perhaps even vague. A partial defense of this assumption can be found in Timpe (unpublished). A particular application of this assumption will be crucial to the present paper.

¹⁷ The medical model is typically accompanied by the belief that disabilities, like other medical problems, ought to be ‘cured’. The World Health Organization, for instance, reports “The medical model views disability as a feature of the person, directly caused by disease, trauma or other health condition, which requires medical care provided in the form of individual treatment by professionals. Disability, on this model, calls for medical or other treatment or intervention, to ‘correct’ the problem with the individual (World Health Organization 2001, 8). In contrast, the social model understands disability to be primarily a feature of a social system rather than an individual. Here, the World Health Organization writes that “on the social model, disability demands a political response, since the problem is created by an unaccommodating physical environment brought about by attitudes and other features of the social environment” (9). Social models usually hold that what needs to be ‘cured’ is not the physical or psychological condition but those features of the environment which disadvantage those with the physical impairment.

¹⁸ The social model as described is not the only way to be a social constructivist about disability, and there are other models besides the two mentioned here. Unfortunately, we cannot explore the relevant issues here. For one of the best treatments of these issues, see Barnes 2016. For a recent discussion of the medical and social models from a theological perspective, see Greig 2015.

environments whose structures disadvantage persons with these conditions. But unlike the social model, the welfare model maintains that there are biological or psychological conditions that are an intrinsic harm to the person. In other words, Kahane and Savulescu maintain that the harm or disadvantage attending some disabilities cannot be accounted for simply in terms of unjust or discriminatory social environments.

The welfare model defines a disability normatively in terms of its impact on a person's well-being. And this feature of their account is particularly relevant to a second debate concerning the nature of the difference involved in being disabled. To borrow Elizabeth Barnes's terminology, there are some who think that disability involves *mere difference* and those who think that disability involves *bad-difference*.¹⁹ At the heart of this distinction is the concern that, apart from the social costs of being disabled, the mere fact of being disabled may make one's life worse off in some objective, intrinsic way. Barnes characterizes this debate as follows:

According to bad-difference views of disability, not only is having a disability bad for you, having a disability would still be bad for you even if society was fully accommodating of disabled people.... According to mere-difference views of disability, having a disability makes you nonstandard or different, but it doesn't by itself make you worse off.²⁰ (2014, 89)

For those who endorse a bad-difference view, whatever it is in virtue of which a person is disabled, that very thing is bad for her.²¹ Many disability advocates and theorists find *bad-difference* views to be problematic, holding instead that "disability is ... a natural part of human diversity— something that should be valued and celebrated, rather than pitied and ultimately 'cured'" (2014, 89). While many intuitively hold to a *bad-difference view*, many disability advocates and theorists claim that the preference for a *bad-difference view* is a reflection of an implicit ableism.²²

The present paper does not require adjudicating this debate. Even if proponents of *mere-difference* views are correct that some disabilities do not make the person's life intrinsically, or objectively, worse off, it doesn't follow from this that all disabilities involve *mere-difference*. In fact, we are inclined to think that some (though only some) disabilities are *bad-differences*. We are inclined to endorse, for

¹⁹ Though there are exceptions, there is a high correlation between endorsing the medical model of disability and the 'bad-difference' view, just as there is a high correlation between affirming social models of disability and 'mere-difference' views.

²⁰ Barnes qualifies the distinction in a number of ways, but she maintains that this "rough-and-ready distinction highlights the basic ideas" (2014, 89) and will be sufficient for present purposes.

²¹ The correlation between those who endorse the *bad-difference* view and those who accept a medical model of disability according to which the bad-making feature ought to be cured seems straightforward. Proponents of *mere-difference* views, like Barnes herself, tend to favor social models of disability, though as noted earlier a position on one of these debates does not entail a position on the other. Thanks to Elizabeth Barnes for conversations on these issues that have shaped what we say here.

²² Some disability rights advocates go a step further than the *mere-difference* view and hold a *disability-positive* view; we will not consider that view further here.

example, the view that at least some cognitive disabilities are *bad-differences*.²³ Carlson and Kittay (2010) refer to these forms of disability as “the philosopher’s nightmare” and the philosophical issues surrounding it are vexed (6). Approximately 1/3 of cases of cognitive disability involve severe or profound disability; but even with a lesser degree of impairment, individuals are often not able to engage in abstract thought or apply abstract principles (including moral principles) across situations (see Evans 1983, 7). Even mild cognitive disability can impact agency and social interaction insofar as individuals with such a disability often are not capable of sufficiently understanding the consequences of their actions. And Harris (2010a) has argued that cognitive disability “ranks as first among chronic conditions that limit full participation in society” (79). Furthermore, when one considers the social isolation and disruptions individuals experience as a result of the interconnections between cognitive disability and emotional and developmental disabilities, it is plausible that these disabilities are *bad-difference* disabilities.

For the purpose of this paper, however, we do not need to argue that there are *bad-difference* disabilities. If all disabilities are *mere-difference* disabilities, then the suffering to which these disabilities give rise is not intrinsic; rather, it is a function of the disabling social conditions in which the person lives. Our concern in this paper is with the potential of *bad-difference* disabilities, the sufferings to which they give rise, and the implications of these factors for debates about the defeat of suffering. So, in what follows, we proceed on the assumption that there are some cases of disability that involve *bad-difference*. The central claim of our paper should thus be read as conditional in nature. *If* there are *bad-difference* disabilities, then the defeat of evil that God’s goodness to His creation requires must involve the defeat of the suffering attending those *bad-difference* disabilities. That is, for each disability that makes an individual objectively worse off, God must make it such that the disability is integrated into an organically whole life such that the individual knows that God is *for her*.²⁴

4. *Bad-difference* Disabilities and the Defeat of Suffering

In this final section, we offer a provisional account of some ways God may defeat the suffering that arises from *bad-difference* disabilities. But it is important to

²³ We use this term to refer to the general range of conditions traditionally associated with ‘mental retardation’. There’s a general shift (both professionally and politically) away from ‘mental retardation’. See Carlson 2010, Carlson and Kittay 2010, and Harris 2010b for additional discussions of the terminological issues involved.

²⁴ Jonathan Reibsam has raised a concern about the possibility of self-inflicted *bad-difference* disabilities. Must God defeat the suffering attending these forms of disability? Although a full discussion of self-inflicted disabilities is beyond the scope of the present paper, we answer that question in brief with the following disjunction. If a self-inflicted *bad-difference* disability is non-culpably caused, then we are inclined to think our treatment in section 4 below will account for it as well. If the self-inflicted *bad-difference* disability is culpably caused, a version of the free-will defense will likely play a crucial role in its defeat. We are content with this dichotomy insofar as we are only attempting to address non-culpably caused *bad-difference* disabilities in the present paper.

reemphasize the fact that we are *not* claiming that all disabilities are horrendous evils. In fact, as indicated above, we are not even committed to the significantly weaker claim that all disabilities are evils *simpliciter*. The proposals outlined below offer a sketch of how God might be good to those individuals with *bad-difference* disabilities such that they can come to recognize and integrate the suffering they experience into a life they consider both meaningful and valuable for themselves.

God's goodness to those with *bad-difference* disabilities involves God's work in helping them to integrate their suffering into a relationship of exceedingly great value with God (and, *via* God, with others). God is good to them in the midst of their affliction by transforming it into something they see as crucial to the meaning of their lives. They may look on the suffering caused by their disability as awful and as something they would rather not have had to endure, but through the defeat of this suffering, they could come to embrace this experience as something integral to the meaning they have recognized.²⁵ A defeated experience is one in which the experience of affliction is not severable from their understanding of the significance and value of their own lives. God is good to them only insofar as he finds a way to defeat their suffering in this way.

The question for us is how God could do this in the case of *bad-difference* disabilities. We think that there are certain social goods and virtues that God makes present to those with *bad-difference* disabilities such that they can recover meaning in the midst of potentially ruinous experience. These social goods might include, though they are not limited to, solidarity with loved ones in their suffering, hospitality, hope, trust—what Alasdair MacIntyre (1999) refers to as virtues of acknowledged dependence. Consider, briefly, one way one might develop such a defense by appeal to the virtue of hospitality.²⁶ Within the Christian tradition, there are explicit instructions to provide for the needs of others.²⁷ And there is an insistence that the failure to extend hospitality to those who are most vulnerable is a moral failure. Furthermore, one of the chief distinguishing features of the hospitality is its offer to those who have no prestige or power to confer on the host.

Central to the theological understanding of hospitality is the notion of care for those who are “strangers,” or those whose status as an “outsider” leaves them vulnerable and without protection. Because of their status as “others” or “outsiders,” these individuals lack both (i) the resources to care for their own needs and (ii) the standing as a member of the community to make claims on the resources of the community to address these needs. Thinking in broadly political terms, “strangers” are those who are in abject need because they are outside of the protection and care of those bonds and attachments central to life within a community. For this reason, they are particularly susceptible to exploitation and abuse; they are, intentionally or unintentionally, subject to discrimination and prejudice from a community who seeks

²⁵ Cobb (2014) captures the kind of embrace we have in mind as follows: “I wouldn’t wish this experience for anyone, but I would not undo what we’ve done” (35).

²⁶ Much more could be said about the Christian virtue of hospitality. For extended discussions of the virtue of hospitality, see Bretherton 2006; Newman 2007; Oden 2001; Pohl 1999; and Reynolds 2008.

²⁷ For Scriptural warrant for this claim, see Isaiah 17, Micah 6:8, Luke 6:30, 1 John 3:17, and 1 Corinthians 10:24. For historical reflections from Church tradition, see especially Oden 2001.

to protect itself from the demands and threats of outsiders. Given the historic mistreatment of those with disabilities, one could argue that many individuals with disabilities are paradigmatic examples of those who ought to receive the care of a hospitable community.

The extension of hospitality, then, is an extension of care and protection to those who are in need. Implicit within this account is a distinction between (i) the host and (ii) the guest. In virtue of her position and possession, the host offers the gift of assistance to the vulnerable guest. But hospitality is more than just the offer of assistance to meet the specific needs of the guest. Hospitality involves dissolving an artificial boundary between the guest and the host. The host invites the guest into a shared space and welcomes her as a person deserving of both honor and care. In this sense, hospitality involves erasing divisions that characterize many communities. In its ideal form, hospitality involves a conversion of the host: she sees the artificiality of the entrenched social boundaries; she recognizes the value and dignity of the stranger along with responsibilities to tend to her needs; and she comes to appreciate the gift she receives in knowing and serving the other. Although it is not inevitable, the host receives an unexpected gift from the presence of the stranger. This is exemplified best in the scriptural account of Abraham's welcome to three angels in which Abraham's hospitality becomes an occasion for receiving the good word that the promised child would be born within the year (Genesis 18:1-15). In short, the host opens himself to the opportunity to receive an unexpected gift. It is not merely that he is offering a space for giving to the one in need; he is offering a space in which he can come to receive something he did not initially perceive he needed. He thought he was giving to benefit the stranger; in turn, he comes to receive a benefit that he would have otherwise missed.

Now that we have a sense for the basic shape or structure of a hospitable disposition, it is important to note the value of hospitality especially as it is ordered toward individual and communal flourishing. Understanding the value of hospitality requires attending to the goods internal to its practice. Individuals with a hospitable disposition possess a deepened understanding of themselves in relation to others and grasp the true locus of value and individual dignity. Furthermore, these individuals are liberated from the arbitrary boundaries implicit within culturally-grounded views of value. Finally, hospitality is a virtue essential to the common good. Given that we are all fragile and dependent beings, we are all in need of the welcome and provision of others. For this reason, the failure to cultivate and practice hospitality both as individuals and as communities effectively cuts us off from basic goods essential to living well within community—goods such as friendship, solidarity, trust, in addition to provision and care for physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual needs. And, most importantly, it severs us from the gifts that the guest offers by her presence within the community.

In what ways does this account of the virtue of hospitality offer insight concerning the ways God could defeat the suffering caused by bad-difference disabilities? These disabilities may threaten to undercut the affected individual's ability to see her life as valuable to herself. But if the community receives and lovingly welcomes the person, she may discover the value of her life. Not only does the welcome of the community indicate to her something about what she deserves, but it

can also afford a space in which her life can become a gift to those who care for her needs. She may not understand the crucial role that she plays in this community. But God can reveal to her the ways in which her life is a gift to the community. It is not merely that her presence makes it possible for those in her community to exercise virtue; instead, it is their exercise of virtue in welcoming her that affords a space for her life to constitute the gift that it is. Her afflictions are not good and she continues to see them as a form of affliction. But the welcome of her community creates a context in which the value of her whole life, even those parts that make her life objectively worse off, could be made manifest both to her and to her community. In this way, the exercise of the virtue of hospitality in response to her needs is not merely a good for the community. It is a good for her because the experience of loving welcome can become an occasion for appreciating the ways a perfectly loving God demonstrates love for her. She has received the great gift of being welcomed into a community in which her greatest needs, including her need to see her life as valuable, can be met.

At this point, it is important to address a potential objection to this line of response. There are some who may worry that this appeal to the virtue of hospitality may justify a *bad-difference* disability because of the way the person's life may be of use to the community.²⁸ On this reading, the person with a *bad-difference* disability is valuable for the community insofar as the community extends a hospitable welcome. The person's presence in their midst affords them the opportunity to exercise the virtue of hospitality. And, thus, the suffering of the afflicted person is justified because it has enabled her to be of use to the community who welcomes her. If this were the best way to construe our appeal to virtue of hospitality, it would not count as a genuine defeat of the suffering attending her disability. Recall, God defeats suffering only to the extent that the person can come to experience her suffering as something that is essential to the meaning and value *she* finds in *her* life. And while some may value the good of being of use to a community, it is not clear that this would be sufficient to satisfy the subjective meaning for many who suffer because of *bad-difference* disability.

In response to this important objection, we maintain that the value of hospitality is not rooted solely in the maturation or flourishing of the community as

²⁸ We would like to thank Marilyn Adams for pressing us to address this concern more explicitly at this point, and to distance our response from Swinburne's account of 'the good of being of use' in Swinburne 1998. There, he claims that God has the right to allow an individual to suffer if the life of that individual is overall good (see, e.g., 235). But his view doesn't require the individual's suffering to actually be good to her, the sufferer. On his view, it is not unjust for God to use an individual's suffering instrumentally for the good of others without her consent in a way that justifies it. As the subsequent discussion hopefully makes clear, our account does not root the primary good of the defeat of the suffering *bad-difference* disabilities can produce in the good of being of use, even though we think such a good could be a proper part of the package of goods that defeats an evil. God defeats the suffering not merely because the community is enabled thereby to cultivate and to exercise the virtue of hospitality but because either (i) within this community, the affected individual is able to exercise her agency in ways that she comes to see and value for herself the ways her affliction is crucial to the full flowering of virtue in her community or (ii) the affected individual is able *post-mortem* to appreciate and appropriate how her affliction was a good for her within that community in addition to being a good for that community.

a virtuous community. The presence of those with bad-difference disabilities affords opportunities for communities to exercise and cultivate the virtue of hospitality, but the central aim of hospitality is the care extended to the person in need. Properly extended, this care transforms both those who host and those who are recipients of the care. The hospitable community sees a person in need for whom they are called to offer welcome and care. In its ideal form, their care for the stranger ends in an unexpected gift. They are not motivated to care in order to become more virtuous; they are motivated to care because of a perceived need which triggers their hospitable dispositions for merciful care. But because of their sensitivity to the stranger, they receive a benefit. We don't think this benefit is primarily the realization of their collective virtue. Rather, we maintain that the benefit is in the revelation that, in caring for those in need, they are caring for Jesus (see Matthew 25). The hospitable community does not see the person as a burden that they must learn to see as a gift. Instead, in the provision of care they are transformed in their understanding of the manifold ways in which God appears in our midst.²⁹

In welcoming those who are afflicted, the community experiences a kind of conversion where they see the ways their community has been enriched by the individual's presence. This is not a recommendation to communities on how to approach their care of those with *bad-difference* disabilities so that they can become more virtuous. This is an account of the way in which a community, through their exercise of hospitality, learns to see those with afflictions not merely as objects of moral concern but as persons who uniquely bear the image of God. And, in this same space, the individual herself can come to appreciate how her life is a gift to the community. In these contexts, the individual can come to identify herself with Christ. Perhaps it is in this identification with Jesus as the vulnerable stranger that the person with a bad-difference can come to value her own afflictions. The value of identifying her own vulnerabilities and attendant suffering with the sufferings of Christ may be a source of great value—the kind of good that defeats the suffering connected to her disability.

We think there is much to commend in this sketch even if it needs further development. Nonetheless, there is a special problem to which it might give rise. Although there are communities who gladly welcome individuals with disabilities, too often our communities are hostile or indifferent toward those who are most vulnerable. And this means that many individuals – especially those with bad-difference disabilities – may not find the kind of welcome they would need to experience their life as meaningful for them. These failures of hospitality draw our attention to the evils of social exclusion that many of these individuals experience.³⁰ What can God do to defeat the evils that emerge from the fact that many of our communities are generally not hospitable to those with disabilities?

One possible response is to draw on eschatological visions of the welcome of God such as those in Luke 14 and the parable of the great banquet. In this parable, Jesus describes a great banquet to which the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the

²⁹ For further development of the notion of a hospitable community, see Cobb (unpublished).

³⁰ For historical treatments of the kinds of exclusion that we worry about here, see Nielsen 2012 and Shapiro 1994.

lame receive invitation. This invitation is to the hospitable welcome of God who receives perfectly and joyously those who are most in need of care. It is a hopeful indication that individuals who have significant limitations and frailty are not excluded from full union with God. There is nothing about their conditions that prevents a loving God from gifting them with the union that constitutes their essential good. And God's invitation to intimate fellowship further evidences God's desire to demonstrate goodness to those who suffer on account of their disabilities. If God's welcome is the ideal form of welcome, then the guest will come to experience the ways in which her life is meaningful and a gift to the community of God. Yong (2009) goes so far as to suggest that "final reconciliation will include a social dimension in which those with disabilities will be reconciled [even] with their nondisabled oppressors.... Ultimately, justice, at least in the form of inclusion, must prevail if meaning is to be found in lives previously deemed unworthy of serious consideration" (69).³¹

At this point, it is important to summarize the chief insight we believe this response contributes to our account of the defeat of the suffering attending bad-difference disabilities. Adams thinks it is crucial that the defeat of horrendous evil is a defeat rooted in the individual's own understanding of the value of her life. It will not be sufficient if her disability serves to benefit or deepen the overall good for her community or even for her alone if she is not able to see the value for herself.³² God's defeat of evil must be for the person in question and it must be recognized and appropriated as such. Adams (1999) contends, "that God could be said to value human personhood in general, and to love individual human persons in particular, only if God were *good to* each and every human person God created. And Divine *goodness* to created persons involves the distribution of harms and benefits, not merely globally, but also with the context of the individual person's life" (31).

This offers an important constraint on the kinds of goods to which we can appeal. After all, one plausible candidate for a good that could defeat this evil is the way in which the presence of those with disabilities can foster improvements in the character of their caregivers or communities. The presence of individuals with disabilities can increase our capacities for solidarity and gracious response. If God has chosen to create a world in which there are strategies for compensating those who are subject to the evils God permits, it is possible that solidarity with each other (both *qua* members of the community and *qua* members of the Body of Christ) may play a significant compensatory role. And we think that a disabled individual's ability to

³¹ See also Ehrman 2015. Whether or not there all disabilities are 'cured' in heaven or whether among the redeemed there will be any disabilities is a complex question, and goes beyond the scope of the present paper. For some of the related literature, see Yong 2007 and 2011, Gould 2016 and forthcoming, and Timpe 2015.

³² Jonathan Reibsam has raised a concern about a potential bias in Adams's privileging the subjective meaning crucial for the defeat of suffering attending bad-difference disabilities. If there are cognitive disabilities that prevent a person from engaging in this kind of meaning-making, it seems that Adams's account displays a bias for typical human cognitive functioning. Although we are sensitive to this concern, we maintain below that the subjective meaning a person finds in her experience may be such that it occurs only after death where the typical limitations associated with cognitive impairments are no longer present.

contribute to the good of the community in this kind of way is an important and valuable gift that should not be overlooked.

However, as noted earlier, Adams's account of defeat requires the good (or goods) by which the suffering is defeated to be goods for the one who suffers. This constraint means that the defeat of the suffering to which bad-difference disabilities give rise must be a defeat within the context of the life of the individual with this disability, not merely within that individual's community to whose common good she contributes. We have tried to make the requirement clear in the preceding pages. God is not perfectly good to this individual if he does not enable her to see her life as good for her. The individual may come to see how her presence in the life of others was good for them, but unless she is also able to grasp how her affliction is central to the beauty and goodness of her own life this evil will not be defeated for her.

At this point, it is important for us to return to Adams's distinction between actual and potential meaning-makers. For Adams, those with profound cognitive impairments may not be included within this class of individuals. On her view, then, it may be the case that the suffering these individuals experience would not count as horrendous evils that need to be defeated. We have argued above that the suffering attending profound cognitive impairments are of the sort that might need to be defeated. So, how can the profoundly cognitively impaired recognize this?

One potential defense involves an appeal to the Christian doctrine of limbo.³³ One aspect of limbo may involve the radical healing of disabilities such that even the profoundly cognitively impaired can come to understand, recognize, and endorse their disability as a way of giving meaning. It may be that their ability to accept the whole of their life—including their suffering—can only happen after death. Adams herself admits that the defeat of horrendous evil will often occur *post mortem* as individuals come to identify the suffering they endured with the person and work of Christ (cf. Adams 2013, 22). For that to happen in the life of the cognitively impaired, it may be that the disability that causes—that *is*—the suffering will have to end. But that is one of the central claims of the Christian hope: that no evil, not even death, is final or ultimately victorious. So, for any bad-making disability that there may be, this too shall be finished, swallowed up in victory.³⁴

Finally, much of what we have said above could be endorsed by individuals of different religious traditions, but we think that the Christian doctrine of the Incarnation gives a further way of addressing the defeat of the sufferings attending the possession of a *bad-difference* disability. In this respect, we endorse Adams's claim

³³ For an account of limbo with this kind of role in mind, see Timpe 2015. It should be clear that that view of limbo differs considerably from how the doctrine has traditionally (but not dogmatically) been understood in Catholic theology. But if one follows Timpe, limbo not only involves healing but also makes possible the opportunity for various goods that are unavailable to some individuals in the present life. This may involve not only healing of cognitive impairments but goods to compensate for the downside of a life of *bad-difference* cognitive impairments.

³⁴ There may also be other ways for the profoundly cognitively impaired to recognize the meaning of their lives. Lorraine Keller has suggested that such a recognition may come through a religious experience that isn't primarily propositional in nature. Here, we're reminded of the words of Jean Vanier: "People suffering from intellectual disabilities do not know God in an intellectual, abstract way, but they can sense when they are loved" (2012, 38). Though we don't have the space at present to pursue this other route to defeat, we think it is worth further consideration.

that much of the discussion of the problem of evil has taken place at too great a level of abstraction—without directly addressing the variety of premises available to those who endorse a specific religious tradition. She contends that “Christian theism embraces a richer store of valuables than secular value-theories recognize,” and, for this reason, it has greater resources to address challenges concerning God’s goodness to those who suffer from ruinous forms of evil (1999, 3).

In this spirit, we believe that one of the lessons of the Incarnation is that a person may willingly suffer certain evils for the sake of defeating goods that are recognized in the lives of those he loves. Christ himself evidences this as he agonizes in the Garden of Gethsemane and prays simultaneously for deliverance and the strength to fulfill his mission. Earlier, he acknowledges the difficulty of willingly surrendering himself to suffering, but notes that it is “for this hour” that he came (John 12:27). The good that comes from Christ’s meritorious suffering and death is not a good that redounds to his own life; rather it is a good that is given to others. Christ suffers, out of love, for the sake of others. One can find subjective meaning in the organic whole of a life that includes suffering if that life is a gift offered to those one loves for the realization of objective goods in their own lives. This is a central lesson of the Incarnation—Christ endorses the whole of his incarnate life, including its many sufferings, as a gift to those who benefit from the goods that his suffering makes possible. As Kathryn Greene-McCreight (2015) says in a slightly different context but which we think is also applicable here: “Suffering is not eliminated by the resurrection but transformed by it” (59).

Furthermore, part of the Christian life is to identify with Christ in his sufferings. One way to do so (though certainly not the only way) is to follow his example regarding offering our sufferings as a gift for others. It may be that individuals may come to see their own disabilities and suffering in the same way as we understand the sufferings that were a part of Christ’s earthly ministry—as a kind of vocation the fulfillment of which is a good in part because of the gift it becomes for those from whom she receives care.³⁵ Especially if the person is received and lovingly welcomed into the community, she may come to see the value in her life as a whole (including her disability) and endorse it, even though she does not see each part of that whole as good. Not only does the welcome of the community indicate to her something about what she deserves, it affords a space in which her life can become a gift to those who care for her needs. As such, her life has a value not merely because of the ways she enriches the community, but a value she subjectively realizes and endorses. And if this happens, then her disability—even if it is a *bad-difference*—is defeated. And until then, as Nicholas Wolterstorff (2001) writes, “we shall hope for the day, await with occasion, and seize the opportunity to own our suffering

³⁵ Byerly and Byerly 2016 argue that there is a particular virtue (or virtues) associated with other-centeredness. They summarize other-centeredness as “a disposition to promote goods of others rather than one’s own goods when the values of these goods are equal or incommensurable” (64). While not all of what we’re talking about is other-centeredness and vice versa, it seems to us that there is the opportunity for some important overlap between the willingness we’re talking about and this virtue.

redemptively. We shall struggle to wrest good from this evil—‘to turn it to profit’—while still saying No to untimely death and unredemptive suffering” (227).³⁶

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