Medieval Disability Sourcebook

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Introduction

Saint Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) was among the most prolific of the early Christian theological writers known as the Fathers of the Church. Born in North Africa to a non-Christian father and Christian mother, Augustine led a tumultuous early intellectual life before converting to Christianity in 386, and eventually becoming bishop of Hippo (modern-day Annaba, Algeria) in late 395 or early 396. His written work remains foundational in Christian theology to this day, and was of particular importance to the development of Christian doctrine in the Middle Ages. The City of God against the Pagans, a lengthy treatise completed near the end of Augustine’s life, defends the superiority of Christianity over other religions despite recent defeats of Rome by heretics and non-Christians (such as the sack of Rome by Goths in 410). The City of God traces a Christian historical trajectory from Creation to the apocalypse, with its promise of the resurrection of the dead and everlasting life. In book 22, Augustine devotes several chapters to discussing the nature of the resurrected body in terms of gender, age, size, and (dis)ability. The passage excerpted below describes the features of the resurrected body, both what the resurrected body will be and what it will not.

Augustine opens the chapter by continuing to respond to a series of questions pertaining to the nature of the body after the resurrection. The implicit questions “about the hair and nails” are: If the body must be resurrected in order for a person to obtain the bliss of the afterlife, and no part of the body will be lost in that resurrection, then what happens to the parts of our bodies that we willingly shed or trim? Will all of the hair and fingernails we have ever grown be restored to horrific effect? Conversely, if the hair and nails that had been trimmed in life are not included in the resurrected body, then is the resurrected body truly the same person?

Augustine unfolds his answer through a series of analogies, which draw upon experiences and expectations of the disabled body to describe the promised resurrected body. He compares the matter of the human body to a clay vessel that (before firing) may be collapsed into shapelessness and then remolded to its previous form, arguing that the vessel is still the same vessel even if individual particles of clay are redistributed to different parts, such as the handle or the base. Likewise, Augustine argues that if a statue is malformed, it can be recast so that the form is perfected, but none of the material is lost. For Augustine this means that there is no need for individuals’ resurrected bodies to “be such as they would not have chosen to be here,” simply because there is an excess or deficiency of material, or because the material is not harmoniously arranged. While this is phrased as reassuring—because one can hope for a “better” body in the afterlife—Augustine’s framework also stigmatizes bodily difference, from being “too thin or too fat” to having “rare and monstrous” deformities. By interjecting that “in any case there is no purpose to deformity but to display in this life the punitive condition of mortality,” August
Augustine unambiguously associates “deformity,” and thereby disability, with the humankind’s fallen state subject to sin and death. The resurrected body, in contrast, is characterized by the erasure of what Augustine calls “defect,” in favor of “what is seemly,” a ranking of bodily forms embedded with assumptions about what is universally desirable in a human body.

The resurrected body thus becomes akin to what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson has called the “normate,” in that it is “the veiled subject position of cultural self, the figure outlined by the array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the normate’s boundaries.” Augustine clearly does not expect living bodies to conform to the harmonious form of the resurrected body, and so the normative power of the resurrection body is limited to urging Christians to anticipate that body in the afterlife, rather than obtain that body in the present. Nonetheless, the expectation that some features are not desirable for the eternal afterlife reflects and reinforces lived experiences of disability and bodily difference in Augustine’s time. That is, Augustine’s theological explanations for how the body will be resurrected as the same body, but without “defect,” reflect very real anxieties about and unhappiness with the ways individuals experienced their own bodies in Augustine’s time, much as they do today. Augustine’s reassurance that “none...should be afraid” suggests that he is more concerned with Christians’ feelings about their own bodies, rather than their judgments of others. However, the concept of the resurrection body being only “what is seemly” creates a theological justification for ableist assumptions about what the body “should” be.

And yet, Augustine complicates the notion of “what is seemly” by asserting that the scars of Christ and the martyrs are honorable, even if the same wound acquired outside the service of Christ would be counted a “defect.” In the same closing movement of the chapter that frames blindness as a punishment for sin and casually jokes about blind individuals needing sighted guides, Augustine also opens up the structure of the resurrection body to include space for variation. The general argument of the chapter, that bodies will be resurrected without any disability, thus nonetheless makes room for the possibility that bodily difference can be a positive experience, both for those with scars and those who look upon them. Though it falls substantially short of supporting a full range of bodily diversity (the saints, after all, will have their amputated limbs reattached), Augustine’s articulation of the resurrected body incorporates disability into both negatively and positively coded features of Christian salvation history.

Bibliography


Now how am I to reply about the hair and nails? Having first understood “not a hair will be lost from the body” to mean that there will be nothing deformed in the body, then this is also understood: any matter that would comprise deformity, if it were left in disorder, will be drawn into the greater form of the body, but not at all in such a way that the contour of the limbs is disfigured. It is just as when a vessel is made from clay, and the clay is then regathered into an unformed mass to be sculpted anew. It is not necessary that the same portion of clay that had been the handle return to the new handle, or that the base return to itself. Despite this, the whole returns to the whole; that is, the whole of that clay becomes again the whole vessel, with nothing of itself lost in having been exchanged between the vessel’s parts. Therefore if the hair of the head, which so often has been shaved, or the nails which have been clipped, would by their return comprise deformity, then they will not be restored. However, neither will anything be lost in the resurrection of each person, because the harmony of the body will be restored in the same flesh, arranged precisely in its place upon the body, though changed in substance.

Indeed, the Lord said: “No hair on your head will perish,” which can be understood to mean the number of hairs plentifully affixed, not the length of the hair. This is why elsewhere he said: “The hairs of your head are numbered.” I have not, therefore, said that I believe anything will be lost from a body that is part of its essential nature, but that anything that had been deformed in life (and in any case there is no purpose to deformity but to display in this life the punitive condition of mortality) will be returned such that material wholeness is preserved, with the deformity passing away. For example, a human artist might for whatever reason create a disfigured statue, but then restore the work to beauty by recasting it, so that no substance is added, but still the deformity is taken away. And if any part of that prior form had protruded indecently, interrupting the balance of its parts, no portion of the whole need be shorn off and cast away, but instead the material may be redistributed and blended in such a way that no ugliness is produced nor is the strength of the sculpture lessened. What then might we think the Almighty Artist capable of? Will he not be able to eliminate any deformities upon human bodies, not limited to those that occur commonly, but also those that are rare and monstrous? These are appropriate for this wretched life, but to the future happiness of the saints they are abhorrent. Will he not thus be able to alleviate any of those unsightly growths in the substance of the body, even if they are of natural causes, without raising the body in any way diminished?

And because of this, none who are too thin or too fat should be afraid that they will be such as they would not have chosen to be here, had they been able to choose. For all beauty of the body is due to the harmony of its parts, along with particular pleasant complexions. But where there is no harmony of its parts, then for that reason the body is unpleasant, either because it is distorted or because it is too small or excessively large. Therefore, there will be no deformity produced by unharmonious parts, in that place where both anyone that is distorted shall be straightened, and those with little of what is seemly will be made whole from a source that the Creator knows, and moreover those with more beyond what is seemly will have that excess removed, while protecting the completeness of bodily matter. How much more sweet the complexion will be in that place where the righteous will shine just like the sun in the reign of their Father!

It is believed that this brightness in the body of Christ, when he rose again, was concealed from the eyes of the disciples, rather than not there at all. For the weak sight of man would not have borne it, when the disciples were required to attend him closely so that they could recognize him. For the
same reason he also exposed the scars of his wounds to be touched, and that he also took food and drink, not for need of nourishment, but by means of that power which likewise made concealing his brightness possible for him. When something is not seen, although it is present, by those who see other equally present things (as I have previously said about that brightness, that it was unseen by those who saw other things), in Greek is it called ἀορασία,° which our interpreters were not able to translate into Latin, and in the book of Genesis it was interpreted as “blindness.”° This is what the men of Sodom endured, when they were seeking the door of the righteous man,° but could not find it.° If this had been that blindness in which nothing can be seen, they would not have been searching for a door to enter, but seeking guides to lead them away from that place.

However, for reasons unknown to me, our deep love for the blessed martyrs leads us to desire to see the scars of their wounds, which they have suffered for the name of Christ, upon their bodies in that kingdom. And perhaps we will see them. For it will not be deformity in them, but distinction, and exceedingly in their body will shine a certain beauty, which is not of the flesh but of virtue.° Moreover, if limbs have at any time been severed or torn away from the martyrs, they will not therefore be without those limbs in the resurrection of the dead, because for them it was said: “No hair on your head will perish.” But if in that new age it is seemly that the tokens of their famous wounds be seen in that immortal flesh, then where limbs had been detached by being struck or carved away, there will be visible scars, but nonetheless the same limbs will be restored, not lost. Thus, at that time all defects that have befallen the body will cease to exist; however, the tokens of virtue will not be named or considered defects.

ἀορασία sightlessness the righteous man Lot
Endnotes


3 This is Augustine’s paraphrase of the line he returns to below, from Luke 21:18.

4 Latin *deforme* can also be translated as “misshapen,” “formless,” or “ugly.”

5 The Latin word *limus*, which I translate here as “clay” as part of the pottery analogy, can also mean “mud,” evoking both the biblical creation of man from dust and the decay of the human body into dust between death and resurrection.


8 This line references Matthew 13:43.

9 The Greek *ἀορασία* or *aorasia* translates most literally in English to “sightlessness,” whereas the Latin supplied here, *caecitatem* translates most directly to “blindness.” The passage in Genesis 19 to which Augustine refers was originally written in Classical Hebrew, but early translations into Latin often depended upon the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. In the late fourth century, St Jerome, a contemporary and correspondent of Augustine, was notably engaged in the monumental task of newly translating the Old and New Testaments into Latin, which became the bulk of the Latin Vulgate Bible.

10 Genesis 19:11. Augustine refers to the story of Lot and the destruction of the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah as divine retribution for their sins. Lot had welcomed two angels into his home, and when the men of Sodom sought to abuse his visitors, Lot offered up his daughters in their stead. The men of Sodom refused this offer, and the angels protected Lot’s household by impairing the men’s vision, so that they could not see the door to Lot’s home. Lot and his family are sent out from the city and thus spared from the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah.

11 Latin *virtutis* can be translated with moral connotations as “virtue” or “courage,” but it can also carry more physical connotations as “strength.”