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A Queer Theological Approach to Fat Flourishing:*

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***Abstract**: In the UK, fat people are characterised as lazy, greedy and a drain on a constrained healthcare system. This characterisation is shaped by three frames (the free-market frame, the biomedical frame, and the social justice frame) and is a barrier to fat people's flourishing. Each frame provides a distinct route to flourishing; however, these routes are incomplete, often contradictory and create irreconcilable positions. Despite the growing field of fat-studies, the current fat theological literature does not adequately address how fat people might flourish in this negative and complex context. This study examines the work of Lisa Isherwood to assess the extent to which queer theology might assist fat flourishing. This examination finds four ways fat flourishing might be assisted: 1) by providing justification for fat-inclusion; 2) by challenging the single negative narrative of fatness to reduce stigma; 3) by critically examining how power structures impact fat flourishing; 4) by providing robust justification for the inclusion of fat people's experience and pleasure in informing ethical action. This study recognises that distinctions between queerness and fatness limit the usefulness of queer theology to assist fat flourishing and recommends that other theologies such as liberation theology and Disability theology might similarly assist fat flourishing.*

Introduction

In the UK today 63.8% of adults are fatter than is considered healthy.[1] Despite this, the dominant understanding of fatness is negative. Fat people are characterised as lazy and greedy.[2] Public health messages portray fat people as diseased.[3] Headlines argue fat people are a drain on

† M. Litt. 2023 University of St Andrews
[1] Carl Baker, 'Obesity Statistics', 23 March 2023, accessed May 4, 2024. Throughout this article the importance of health is recurrent. I recognise that health has many interpretations that cannot be covered in this short work. I will be using health in its most basic form to describe a physical and mental state from which people can flourish. However, as will become apparent in my work, being more specific about what constitutes health is complicated because the answer is always individual and contextual.
[2] Andrew Prentice and Susan Jebb, 'Obesity in Britain: Gluttony or Sloth?', *BMJ* 311, no. 7002 (1995): 437–39.
[3] 'Obesity', nhs.uk, 23 November 2017. Accessed 06/07/23.

healthcare resources.[4] Fatness is used to depict villains, buffoons and undesirables in TV and film.[5] I argue that this framing impacts fat flourishing and therefore needs challenging.

'Fat' is a divisive term and there is power in who gets to define it. Some fat activists are trying to reclaim fat as a neutral descriptor, but some ethicists argue neutrality is unachievable.[6] Each framing of fatness understands fatness in different ways. These categories can appear stable, but they change over time and in different contexts. Throughout this paper I use fatness to describe people whose body size results in them experiencing medical and or social barriers. Defining fatness more tightly is difficult because there is not an identifiable size at which a person becomes fat and starts experiencing medical or social barriers. In medical settings a scale, the Body Mass Index (BMI), is used to categorise fat people. This scale pinpoints precise moments at which the ratio of a person's hight and weight becomes a medical concern. As I will discuss at some length, this categorization of fatness does not neatly correlate with worse health outcomes and fails to recognise the social aspects of fatness. Fat liberation movements categorise fat people based on the level of discrimination they experience 'small fats' experiencing the least barriers to public life and 'super fats' or 'inifi fats' experiencing the most. However this model fails to recognise any medical or physical barriers fat people might face and speaks only to the social aspects of fatness. For this reason I will not be using either of these methods to define fat people, opting instead for a loser but, I hope, more holistic view of fatness that recognises the large spectrum of physical, medical and social experience encompassed in the phrase 'fat people' and the extent to which this experience is always shaped by an individual's context.

This article assesses the extent to which Lisa Isherwood's queer theology can be used to assist fat flourishing and challenge the dominant understanding of fatness in the UK. In part one I critically examine the frames through which fatness is understood, finding they each assist and hamper fat flourishing. Absolutist beliefs create seemingly irreconcilable positions about fatness and fat flourishing. Therefore, these frames must be disrupted to realise fat flourishing. To define fat flourishing, I utilise Neil Messer's theology, determining that fat flourishing requires: flourishing in relationship with God creation and one's self; pursuing a life that aligns with God's

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[4] Kate Pickles, 'How Obesity Is Draining the NHS of Billions', Mail Online, 17 May 2023.
[5] Barbara Plotz, *Fat on Film: Gender, Race and Body Size in Contemporary Hollywood Cinema* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2020).
[6] Heather Widdows, *Perfect Me: Beauty as an Ethical Ideal* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018

good purposes and; acknowledgement of the limitation of flourishing in this life, what Messer calls "the penultimate."[7]

In part two I review approaches to flourishing in the current fat theological literature. I find three approaches: critique of Christian weight loss programmes; focus on barriers to flourishing; and the development of new ways to consider fatness. However, I conclude, the fat theological literature has not completely satisfied questions about fat flourishing and suggest other theological traditions might assist fat flourishing more fully. Finding commonality between queer and fat experience, I argue queer theology might usefully assist this task. To test this, I focus on Lisa Isherwood's work on inclusion, disrupting the straight mind, naming and challenging power, pleasure ethics, epistemological flesh, and love-talk.

In part three I use Isherwood's queer theology to challenge the barriers to fat flourishing. I conclude that Isherwood's queer theology assists fat flourishing by promoting inclusion, bringing nuance to the seemingly irreconcilable positions within the fat frames critically examining how systems of power impact fat people, and informing ethical action by centering fat joy. However, I find that distinctions between fat and queer experience limit the ability of queer theology to assist fat flourishing. I argue this limitation would be mitigated by drawing on a range of theologies that intersect with fat experience.

Part one: Understanding fat frames and flourishing

The way fatness is understood in the UK can appear to be a natural response to the facts of fatness. However, I argue that the largely negative understanding of fatness is shaped by socio-economic and cultural elements rather than an objective or neutral desdription of the facts of fatness. In this section I describe how frame analysis can be used to understand how the free market, biomedical understanding, and the social justice movements shape the collective understanding of fatness and impact the flourishing of fat people. Building on Neil Messer's theological approach to flourishing, I argue that fat flourishing requires new ways of thinking about fatness that destabalise how fatness and fat flourishing is currently understood. Doing so requires seemingly irreconcilable positions that arise from the different ways fattnes is understood to be brought together in a nuanced and sensitive way.

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[7] See pp. 65ff below.

Fat frames

Samantha Kwan uses frame analysis to identify three main ways fatness is interpreted: the free market frame, the biomedical frame, and the social justice frame.[8] Frame analysis recognises that cultural understanding of a social issue such as 'fatness' is not exclusively derived from objective conditions but is shaped by a collective process of definition. This process involves cultural struggles about the way in which ideas are formed. This struggle is evident in the framing of fatness in which the meaning, cause, and flourishing of fatness are contested. This makes the fat body a site of struggle demonstrating the necessity to understand the frames through which fatness and fat flourishing is interpreted.

The free-market frame.

The free-market framing of fatness prioritises the choices of individuals to eat according to their own judgment.[9] In this frame, food is a personal matter that should be managed without interference from governmental health campaigns or legislation. The main stakeholders are food and drink companies (Big Food) who resist legislation aimed at reducing consumption of their products, often successfully.[10]

The US food pyramid provides a stark example of Big Food's ability to direct public health messaging. This pyramid was a visual representation of the dietary guidelines promoted by the United States Department of Agriculture.[11] Big Food successfully lobbied to change the pyramid to a circle so that foods could not be interpreted as better or worse for health. Examples like this hamper people's ability to flourish by denying them reliable and bias-free nutrition advice. In response, Big Food argues governments should leave consumers to make 'common sense decisions' about their eating.[12] Similar patterns can be seen in the UK. For example, Big Food have influenced government legislation about sugar taxes and 'junk food promotions' in supermarkets, influencing what UK consumers eat.[13]

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[8] Samantha Kwan, 'Framing the Fat Body: Contested Meanings between Government, Activists, and Industry, *Sociological Inquiry* 79, no. 1 (2009): 25–50.
[9] Kwan, 'Framing,' 39.
[10] Talha Burki, 'Sugar Tax in the UK', *The Lancet Oncology* 17, no. 5 (2016).
[11] 'My Plate,' United States Department of Agriculture, accessed May 5 2024.
[12] Kwan, 'Framing,' 39.
[13] Burki, 'Sugar,' e182.

The free market frame rightly promotes vigilance about government paternalism; however, skepticism is warranted given the financial incentive for Big Food, motivated by profit rather than the flourishing of individuals or populations, to resist industry regulation. The free market framing of fatness is not primarily focused on flourishing. Further, most of the research about the free frame focuses on the US and is not easily translated to the UK context due to differences in lobbying laws and healthcare systems. Therefore, I only consider this frame briefly.

However, implicit in the arguments of the free market frame are the assumptions that the food one eats correlates to one's body size and that fatness negatively impacts health. Both these assumptions are complicated and understood differently in the biomedical and social justice frames.

The biomedical frame

The biomedical frame is the way in which fatness is understood today. Ubiquitous, it is understood as an unchanging and truthful description of the facts of fat bodies rather than a frame through which fatness is interpreted.[14] It pathologises fatness as 'obesity,' which has been classified as disease by the WHO (World Health Organisation) since 1936.[15] This classification is divisive; however, if nothing else, this classification is necessary for attracting headlines and funding, essential for further research.[16]

Body mass index (BMI) uses an individual's height and weight to identify who is 'overweight' and 'obese'.[17] Higher BMI is associated with increased health risks which are understood to be caused by fatness and reduced through weight loss. Although BMI is recognised as an inelegant tool for assessing an individual's health, it is often used to identify whether individuals qualify for medical intervention and is promoted as a way individuals can assess their health.[18] Non-medical institutions, such as insurance companies and adoption agencies, also use BMI to determine individual's health.[19]

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[14] Charlotte Cooper, 'Fat Studies: Mapping the Field', *Sociology Compass* 4, no. 12 (2010): 1203.
[15] WHO Consultation on Obesity (1999: Geneva Switzerland) and Organization World Health, 'Obesity: preventing and managing the global epidemic' (World Health Organization, 2000).
[16] John Wilding, Vicki Mooney, and Richard Pile, 'Should Obesity Be Recognised as a Disease?', *BMJ* 366 (17 July 2019): 4258.
[17] 'What Is the Body Mass Index (BMI)?', nhs.uk, 26 June 2018.
[18] 'BMI Calculator,' NHS, 28 October 2021.
[19] Deb Newcomb, 'BMI Criteria for Adoption,' accessed 05 May 2024.

The biomedical frame argues that fatness must be solved by reducing the size of fat bodies (weight loss) and eradicating the possibility for people to become fat. Weight loss is primarily pursued through low-cost public health messaging that encourage people to 'eat less and move more'. Public health campaigns such as '5 a day' utilise advertising, schools programmes, and healthcare settings to encourage people to diet and exercise.[20] More invasive intervention can be prescribed including appetite suppressants, weight loss injections and surgical procedures to shrink or remove the stomach. These interventions are more effective at achieving weight loss but are more expensive and have increased risk of medical complication.[21] This framing presents fatness as preventable and curable primarily through an individual's effort and is the predominant way in which biomedical framing is encountered.

Weaknesses of the biomedical frame

Fatness and health. While biomedical framing of fatness has successfully equated being fat with negative outcomes, medical research challenges the belief that fatness is always unhealthy.[22] The Health at Every Size (HAES) movement argues that diseases associated with fatness have other potential causes such as repeated dieting, poverty and trauma.[23] In response, the biomedical frame counters that this is not unique to obesity - related diseases, arguing that no disease has only one cause and there are enough correlates to identify obesity as the primary cause of many conditions.[24]

Based on these correlations, the BMI scale is used as a measure of health. This is challenged by the HAES movement who argue health can be achieved at any size. This is supported by research that shows almost half of individuals categorized as 'obese' through the use of BMI are metabolically healthy and 30% of 'normal' weight individuals are metabolically unhealthy.[25] Further, having a higher body mass can be associated with increased life expectancy and protection

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[20] '5 A Day,' NHS, 10 August 2022. 'Change4Life [Overview]', accessed 5 May 2024.
[21] Baker, "Obesity Statistics."
[22] Roni Elran-Barak and Yoav Bar-Anan, 'Implicit and Explicit Anti-Fat Bias: The Role of Weight-Related Attitudes and Beliefs', *Social Science & Medicine* 204 (May 2018): 117–24.
[23] Stephanie Papadopoulos and Leah Brennan, 'Correlates of Weight Stigma in Adults with Overweight and Obesity: A Systematic Literature Review', *Obesity* 23, no. 9 (2015).
[24] 'Obesity as a Disease: A White Paper on Evidence and Arguments Commissioned by the Council of The Obesity Society - ProQuest', accessed 5 April 2023.
[25] A. Tomiyama et al., 'Misclassification of Cardiometabolic Health When Using Body Mass Index Categories in NHANES 2005–2012', *International Journal of Obesity* 40, no. 5 (May 2016): 883–86.

against diseases such as osteoporosis.[26] Despite this, BMI continues to be used as a measure of health resulting in medical conditions being under diagnosed in 'normal' weight individuals and over diagnosed in higher weight individuals.[27]

BMI is most useful for assessing the health of populations; however, it is routinely used in isolation to assess individual's health in ways that hamper flourishing. For example, in vitro fertilisation is only available to patients with BMIs between 19 and 25.[28] Fat people face further barriers to starting a family when adoption agencies use BMI to assess parental suitability.[29] These uses of BMI negatively impact fat people and misleadingly assert health can be determined by body size alone, legitimising the marginalisation of fat people.

Causes of fatness. Research shows obesity is complicated and has many contributing factors, many of which are outside an individual's control. Sexism, racism, poverty, childhood trauma, education and access to culturally appropriate foods all contribute to the likelihood of adults becoming obese.[30] Despite this, fat people are often viewed as having personally failed in their duty to regulate their body size and manage their own health. This reflects neoliberal politics that emphasise personal choice and responsibility while downplaying systemic causes and solutions.

Weight loss. Research shows intentional weight loss leads to long-term weight gain. While individuals may experience short-term reduction in weight, most will return to their original or a higher long-term.[31] This makes prescribing weight loss problematic because there is no proven way for fat patients to significantly reduce their weight indefinitely. Despite this, weight loss is still routinely prescribed, being the cheapest intervention for obesity.[32] This can lead to weight cycling, the repetition of weight loss through diet, followed by weight gain. This is harmful because it leads to weight gain and therefore further marginalization. Furthermore, correlations

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[26] 'Keeping Your Weight up in Later Life', NHS, 28 October 2021.
[27] Tomiyama et al., 'Misclassification'.
[28] 'IVF,' NHS, 20 October 2017.
[29] Newcomb, 'Adoption.'
[30] Charlotte Cooper, 'Fat Lib: How Fat Activism Expands the Obesity Debate', in *Debating Obesity: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Emma Rich, Lee F. Monaghan, and Lucy Aphramor (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), 164–91.
[31] Philippe Jacquet et al., 'How Dieting Might Make Some Fatter: Modeling Weight Cycling toward Obesity from a Perspective of Body Composition Autoregulation', *International Journal of Obesity* 44, no. 6 (June 2020): 1243–53.
[32] E. Loveman et al., 'The Clinical Effectiveness and Cost-Effectiveness of Long-Term Weight Management Schemes for Adults: A Systematic Review', in *NIHR Health Technology Assessment Programme: Executive Summaries* (NIHR Journals Library, 2011).

between weight cycling and obesity - related disease are stronger for patients that have weight cycled than those who are fat but have never dieted.[33] The more an individual diets, the harder subsequent weight losses become, leading to extremely risky diet-behaviour with the potential to normalise disordered eating (which is under - diagnosed in obese individuals).[34] Therefore, prescribing weight loss might be easy and affordable in a constrained healthcare system but remains problematic as it harms fat people and contributes to the problem it attempts to solve.

Pathologising fat people. The medicalisation of fat people and the nomenclature of the obesity epidemic places fat people at the centre of a moral panic. Obesity was declared an epidemic at the turn of the millennium when the WHO held a summit entitled, '*Obesity: Preventing and Managing the Global Epidemic*' followed by the release of the UK '*Foresight'* report.[35] These reports predicted an obesity epidemic in which global health would be degraded increasing the financial burden of care. This rhetoric is damaging to fat people because it positions them as an economic and social threat. Further, the language of 'epidemic' suggests 'contagion' making proximity to fat people dangerous. This framing stigmatises fat people.

The obesity epidemic has led to a rise in healthism, a moralised pursuit of a physical ideal that equates being slim with being good. This contributes to the destigmatizing of all bodies regardless of size. Healthism fails to recognize the privilege required to achieve 'good health'. Genetics, social conditions, and wealth are all important contributing factors to 'good health' that are not equally distributed in the population. This results in the moralization of health favouring already privileged people and further oppressing marginalized people. Further, healthism promotes pursuing thiness at any cost -paradoxically leading to unhealthy habits – and so can be linked to a rise in disordered eating.[36]

While there are clear negative impacts of pathologising fat bodies, the motivation to do so has been driven by pragmatism and a desire to destigmatise fatness. Pragmatically, the language of disease and epidemic has attracted headlines and therefore funding necessary to further

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[33] Jacquet et al., 'How Dieting.'
[34] Anna Keski-Rahkonen and Linda Mustelin, 'Epidemiology of Eating Disorders in Europe: Prevalence, Incidence, Comorbidity, Course, Consequences, and Risk Factors', *Current Opinion in Psychiatry* 29 (1 November 2016): 340–45.
[35] Cooper, 'Fat Studies,' 1202; Bryony Buhealthtland et al., 'Foresight. Tackling Obesities: Future Choices – Project Report' (Government office for Science, 2005).
[36] Amy Arguedas, ''Can Naughty Be Healthy?': Healthism and Its Discontents in News Coverage of Orthorexia Nervosa', *Social Science & Medicine* 246 (1 February 2020): 112784.

research.[37] Furthermore, classifying obesity as a disease may be destigmatising if it encourages people to consider obesity amorally as they would diseases such as breast cancer.

Impact of the biomedical frame

The biomedical framing of fat people aims to improve fat people's health and lessen the perceived burden of fat people on a constrained healthcare system through weight loss. The model pathologises fatness by viewing obesity as a cause rather than a correlate of many health conditions. Through the nomenclature of the obesity epidemic, this framing of fatness attracts funding to improve the health of individuals and the population. This approach focuses on individual responsibility to eat less and move more, aiming to solve the problems fat people face through cheap and non-invasive interventions in the first instance. However, this framing moralises fat people positioning them personally culpable and a drain on healthcare resources. Further, a weight loss approach to enhancing fat people's lives has been shown to cause many of the health problems it seeks to reduce and often increases the body size of those who diet. Finally, the biomedical framing categorises people using a flawed BMI scale bolstering the idea that body size alone can be used to determine health which hampers flourishing.

The social justice frame.

The social justice framing of fatness focuses on the discrimination, stigma and marginalisation of fat people. This discrimination is known as fatphobia or anti-fat bias and is rooted in the belief that fat people are moral failures responsible for their fatness. Tovar describes this as a form of bigotry that equates being fat with being ugly, undeserving, and inferior.[38] Research suggests fatphobia is widespread, impacting access to employment, healthcare, and education.[39]

The social justice frame uses 'fategories' to categorise the different types of discrimination fat people experience depending on the size of their body. The categories start at 'small-fat' to describe someone who faces some medical discrimination and poor interpersonal treatment but is not generally excluded from public life because of their size. 'Super-fat' describes the fattest

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[37] Eric Oliver, 'The Politics of Pathology: How Obesity Became an Epidemic Disease', *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine* 49 (2006): 611–27.
[38] Virgie Tovar, *You Have the Right to Remain Fat: A Manifesto* (Melville House UK, 2018).
[39] R. Puhl and K. D. Brownell, 'Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity', *Obesity Research* 9 (December 2001): 788–805.

people who face significant barriers.[40] Fatphobia is intersectional and disproportionately impacts individuals with multiple marginalised identities. For example, Strings argues that the origins of fatphobia emerged in the Enlightenment belief that fatness was evidence of 'savagery' and racial inferiority.[41]

The social justice frame understands fatness to be caused by multiple factors (many beyond an individual's control) such as genetics and trauma. Medical research supports a multifactorial understanding of fatness, despite the biomedical model focusing on eating and exercise.[42] The different understandings about the cause of fatness lead to different solutions. The biomedical frame argues that fat people's lives are improved through individual endeavor and weight loss. The social justice frame rejects this, firstly by rejecting the belief that people need to lose weight and secondly by highlighting the factors that lead to fatness. This framing is potentially liberating for fat people as it externalises blame, removing the responsibility of alleviating their own marginalisation.

The social justice frame asserts that individuals of all sizes can be healthy; however, it acknowledges the barriers that make it difficult for fat people to attain good health and fitness. Research shows that fat people receive inadequate healthcare treatment in which underlying health conditions are less likely to be explored due to assumptions about their health.[43] This poor treatment makes fat people less likely to seek medical help, exacerbating poor health outcomes. Further there are social and practical barriers to physical activity, such as fatphobia in gyms and difficulty buying activewear. This challenges the belief that people are solely responsible for preventing fatness through exercise.

The social justice frame is primarily expressed in fat liberation spaces, online and in-person communities that offer spaces fat people can exercise, seek medical care and socialize without 'fat-talk'(conversations about weightloss and the assumption that being fat is bad). Its primary aim is to remove stigmatising barriers, not assist weight loss. Members are encouraged to embrace 'fat' as a neutral descriptor, in the same way someone might describe themself as tall.[44] Body neutrality

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[40] lindag, 'Fategories – Understanding the Fat Spectrum', *Fluffy Kitten Party* (blog), 1 June 2021.
[41] Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: NYU Press, 2019).
[42] Baker, 'Obesity Statistics'.
[43] A. Janet Tomiyama et al., 'How and Why Weight Stigma Drives the Obesity "Epidemic" and Harms Health', *BMC Medicine* 16 (15 August 2018): 123.
[44] lindag, 'Fategories.'

is also promoted through an anti-diet culture stance in which fat people are encouraged to eat intuitively, listening to their body's hunger and cessation cues, and practice joyful movement rather than exercising. This is often a radical departure from the diet-culture fat people have been immersed in: eating for weight loss and exercising to earn food or punish their bodies.

Weaknesses of the social justice frame

The social justice frame's focus on the societal barriers fat people face fails to acknowledge the ways fatness itself limits flourishing. Swain and Finkelstein et al suggest that Disability theory might mitigate this failing by distinguish between Disability (social exclusion) and impairment (physical limitation).[45] Although the social justice frame provides a meaningful challenge to the biomedical frame, its focus on social exclusion disregards physical impairment related to fatness. Tom Shakespeare raises concerns about downplaying the medical aspect of Disability, arguing that some problems Disabled people face are a result purely of impairment and not societal barriers.[46] In the same way, there is a medical reality of fat bodies which is ignored and sometimes denied in fat liberation spaces. For example, some may find going for a walk difficult because clothing is inaccessible or because of the street harassment they experience, but their body size may also make going for a walk difficult. Further, as Shakespeare highlights, social exclusion and physical limitation are causally separated in both the biomedical and social justice frame, but in practice medical and social aspects of fatness are inextricable.[47]

Fat liberation began with black trans women and embraces intersectionality, yet fat liberation spaces and especially academic fat studies are dominated by white cis non-Disabled women.[48] This skews the research and emphasis of fat liberation spaces because attitudes and beliefs about fatness are racialised. For example, research finds that white women are more likely to be diagnosed with anorexia than non-white women and Black women are less likely to be unhappy because of their body size.[49] The homogenous nature of fat liberation spaces risks failing

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[45] Michael Oliver, *The Politics of Disablement* (London: Macmillan Education UK, 1990); John Swain et al., *Disabling Barriers - Enabling Environments, Second Edition*, Second edition (London; Thousand Oaks, Calif: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2004).
[46] Tom Shakespeare, 'The Social Model of Disability', in *The Disability Studies Reader*, ed. Lennard J. Davis (Taylor & Francis, 2016), 197–204.
[47] Shakespeare, 'Social,' 198.
[48] Cooper, 'Fat Lib'.
[49] Mary S. Himmelstein, Rebecca M. Puhl, and Diane M. Quinn, 'Intersectionality: An Understudied Framework for Addressing Weight Stigma', *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* 53 (1 October 2017): 421–31.

to address the needs of all fat people. White non-Disabled cis women have more power to shape fat activism spaces due to their disproportionate representation in academic fat-studies, leadership positions within activism spaces and epistemic authority with stakeholders.[50] This imbalance of power means that the needs of the most marginalised fat people can be overlooked or misinterpreted in the only formal counter to the dominant biomedical framing, limiting the efficacy of the social justice model.

Impact of the social justice frame

The social justice framing of fatness is an essential step in challenging the dominant understanding of fatness and the ways it harms fat people. It provides spaces in which fat people can connect with others and their bodies unapologetically, away from dominant narratives in which their bodies are marginalised. Expression of this frame are critical in campaigns that address the social barriers to fat flourishing. However, this frame fails to recognise that fatness itself can impair people's ability to flourish.

The biomedical frame provides the dominant view of fatness in the UK today. While it is rooted in medicine, the frame is upheld by social, economic, political and interpersonal stakeholders. [51] Stakeholders, such as pharmaceutical companies are financially invested in upholding the biomedical model to sell weight loss solutions. In contrast, neo-liberal governments are politically invested in the biomedical frame's focus on personal over structural solutions to fatness. The biomedical frame is further buoyed by social and interpersonal relationships that, according to Everette, fail to intervene or even participate in upholding the frame.[52] This combination of social, political and economic stakeholders result in a robust dominant understanding of fatness which harms fat people, is hard to challenge, and is perceived as factual.

A new fat frame

We need a new framing of fatness to assist fat flourishing. The dominant framing in the UK fails to meet the complex and diverse needs of fat people because it focuses on the medical aspects of fatness. The social justice frame robustly challenges this framing; however, it also fails to address the breadth of fat experience, narrowly focusing on social barriers. Moreover, the free-

[50] Cooper, 'Fat Studies'.
[51] Charlotte Cooper, *Fat and Proud: Politics of Size* (London: The Women's Press Ltd, 1998).
[52] Barbara Everett, 'Stigma: The Hidden Killer' (Ontario: Mood Disorders Society of Candad, 2006).

market frame contributes to the systemic exploitation of fat people. These seemingly irreconcilable positions are hard to navigate and require skill, energy and knowledge from those who pursue fat flourishing. This itself is a barrier to flourishing as the skills needed are not shared equitably. The new framing must consider fat experience more broadly than the biomedical or social justice frame. I now turn to the work of Neil Messer to discuss the broadness that fat flourishing requires.

Human flourishing – Neil Messer

Neil Messer's understanding of human flourishing is rooted in reformed theology and relies heavily on the work of Karl Barth.[53] His understanding of flourishing pays particular attention to health and wellbeing, making it a valuable resource to this work.[54] Utilising Disability theory, Messer challenges the narrow definitions of flourishing such as those presented by the three framings of fatness I have presented.[55] Central to his argument is the Christian belief that humans are God's creatures, a theological category which is both descriptive and teleological.[56] Describing humans as 'creatures' acknowledges humanity is part of God's good creation, reaffirming the intrinsic good to being human.

However, this does not mean that everything humans do is good or God-willed.[57] Rather, human creatures are finite beings with limited ability to understand God's good purposes and struggle to realise God's will because of sin and natural evil.[58] Despite this difficulty in understanding God's will, being human is purposeful.[59]

For Messer, this purpose is the realisation of God's good purpose for humanity which is achieved in two stages: ultimate and penultimate flourishing. Ultimate flourishing is the complete fulfilment of God's will for creation. It is the eschatological hope of Christians, achieved through Jesus's death and resurrection and through God's grace which will be realised in the new creation.[60] Penultimate flourishing happens in this life where humans have a responsibility to live lives according to the individual and collective flourishing of all people. For Messer the

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[53] Neil G. Messer, 'Human Flourishing: A Christian Theological Perspective', in *Measuring Well-Being: Interdisciplinary Perspectives from the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. Matthew T. Lee, Laura D. Kubzansky, and Tyler J. VanderWeele (Oxford University Press, 2021), 285-305.
[54] Ibid, 285.
[55] Ibid, 285.
[56] Ibid, 287.
[57] Ibid, 287.
[58] Ibid, 288.
[59] Ibid, 288.
[60] Ibid, 289.

penultimate matters because it is in this world that human creatures encounter God's love and promise of the ultimate.[61]

Messer challenges those who equate flourishing with good health by drawing on four principles in Barth's work. Firstly, 'freedom before God' describes collective and individual right relationship with God. Secondly, 'freedom in fellowship' describes right relationship with each other and creation. Thirdly, 'freedom for life' describes the embodied aspect of being human and is most closely related to our current understanding of health. Finally, 'freedom in limitation' accepts that humans are finite beings confined to a particular time and place in which their penultimate flourishing is shaped.[62] Messer concludes that while health is important, it is not alone sufficient. Human flourishing requires more.

Messer believes that the contemporary western pursuit of health has made health an ultimate, rather than penultimate, goal. This pursuit of health 'at any cost' is idolatrous.[63] Messer argues that flourishing sometimes requires the pursuit of other things at the expense of health; for example, vocation, living a purposeful life, is certainly part of a life well-lived, but may require us to risk health in pursuit of God's call.[64] However, this argument presupposes the privilege of choice unafforded to those without the basic level of health required to survive, for example those experiencing famine. An important question unanswered in Messer's work is: who gets to decide when the pursuit of health becomes idolatrous and in what contexts?

Limitations of Messer's work

As a potential resource for assisting fat flourishing, Messer's work is limited by his conclusions about self-acceptance. Messer views self-acceptance skeptically. A Christian-based self-acceptance would require us to look truthfully at our flaws and sins, but then accept ourselves despite them. However, a cavalier self-acceptance could border on self-deception in which individuals become satisfied with parts of themselves that need improvement.[65] In the dominant understanding of fatness, the fat body is flawed and requires changing, so from Messer's

[61] Messer, 290.
[62] Ibid, 290.
[63] Ibid, 294.
[64] Ibid, 294.
[65] Ibid, 296.

perspective fat people practicing self-acceptance despite, rather than inclusive of, their fatness is a reflection of God's love for them.

Where the dominant frame views the fat body as flawed, fat people practicing self-acceptance is a radical protest which positively impacts their mental wellbeing.[66] While I accept Messer's argument that all humans are flawed and that the Christian understanding of self-acceptance flows from a belief that God loves us despite our flaws, this argument cannot be separated from the harm of the dominant framing of fatness. This is a problem because it could lead to the belief that some thin bodies are loveable because they are perfect, and some fat bodies are loveable despite their imperfection. Therefore, important to determining fat flourishing is understanding when fatness makes the body flawed (and therefore cannot be accepted), in what context, and who gets to decide. The social justice frame solves this problem by promoting self-acceptance and asserting that people should never engage in purposeful weight loss; however, this approach denies the ways in which physical aspects of fatness can hamper flourishing.

Fat flourishing

Extrapolating Messer's work to the flourishing of fat people provides three convincing reasons why Christians should care about fatness. Firstly, fat people's ability to flourish in line with God's good purposes is hampered by the dominant understanding of fatness. Secondly, human flourishing is broad but understood too narrowly in the fat frames. Thirdly, pursuing health as an ultimate concern is idolatrous but fat people are encouraged to pursue health through slimming -- often at high cost.

Drawing from Messer's work, I understand fat flourishing to be the ability of fat people to live and achieve their God-given potential in relationship with God and all creation. Unlike Messer, I argue that one's relationship with their body is essential for fat flourishing. This broad approach to fat flourishing requires the fat frames to be challenged because they define flourishing too narrowly to assist flourishing.

Pursuing a broader approach to fat flourishing requires theologians to skillfully manage seemingly irreconcilable positions held by the fat frames. These positions are hard to reconcile

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[66] Thomas F. Cash and Karen L. Hicks, 'Being Fat versus Thinking Fat: Relationships with Body Image, Eating Behaviors, and Well-Being', *Cognitive Therapy and Research* 14, no. 3 (1 June 1990): 327–41.

because they are contradictory and make different assumptions and value judgements about fatness. I argue that navigating these tensions is key to flourishing in the penultimate.

Tensions in the penultimate

Messer argues that caring for the body is an important part of penultimate flourishing. Self-care that promotes health enables penultimate flourishing; however, a preoccupation with health can become idolatrous. Nevertheless, who gets to decide when self-care has become idolatrous is important and has the potential to embed biases detrimental to marginalised and overlooked communities.

The question of whether fatness can ever be healthy is contentious and difficult to answer. The biomedical frame argues that fatness is unhealthy, understanding fatness to degrade health and therefore be a barrier to flourishing. However, the social justice frame resists this medicalisation and insists that health, and therefore flourishing, can be achieved at every size, and is only hampered by social barriers. The frames disagree about the barriers to flourishing and therefore the solutions required to assist flourishing.

If fatness does degrade health, it follows that weight loss is essential for flourishing. However, weight loss presents another seemingly irreconcilable position between the fat frames. For the biomedical frame, weight loss should always be pursued to assist fat flourishing and for the social justice frame weight loss should never be pursued.

Another seemingly irreconcilable position concerns an individual's ability to control their body size. The biomedical frame asserts body size results from an individual's eating and exercising. However, the social justice model argues that body size is predominately determined by social and genetic factors. This distinction is important because it impacts how fatness and sin are perceived and the efficacy of weight loss interventions. The biomedical frame legitimises the moralisation of fat bodies by arguing fat people are greedy and lazy, equating fatness and personal sin. Whereas the social justice model argues that fatness is never sinful and calls for a neutral view of body size. Further the free-market frame raises important questions about the role of powerful stakeholders and systemic sin.

Conclusion

In this part I have argued that the largely negative understanding of fatness in the UK is shaped by three distinct frames: the free market, the biomedical, and the social justice frame. These

frames impact the lives of fat people in positive and negative ways but alone cannot provide solutions to the barriers that fat people face. New ways of thinking about fatness need to be established. Messer's work has been essential for determining the broadness of fat flourishing and highlighting the need to rethink the current ways in which fatness is framed. Next, I review the academic literature in fat theology to establish how theologians have already approached fat flourishing.

Part Two Theological Approaches to Fatness

In this part I argue that the emerging field of fat theology has not yet comprehensively considered what is required for fat people to flourish. I argue that the intersection of queer and fat experience makes queer theology a useful resource to fat theology and examine the queer theology of Lisa Isherwood to identify areas of her work that might assist fat flourishing. However, I argue that distinctions in fat and queer experience limit the extent to which this approach might be considered successful.

Fat studies, the academic formalisation of fat liberation movements, can be traced back to 1960s USA where it grew out of civil rights and feminist movements.[67] Collectives formed to consider the needs of fat women ignored by the mainstream feminist movement.[68] These collectives developed critical work on the medicalisation of fatness and the diet industry. In the 1990s fat studies emerged, an inter-disciplinary field that critically studies the fat body and experience. Pivotal in the formation of fat studies was the obesity epidemic and a shift in cultural studies towards considering the body as an important site for understanding power.[69] Rooted in social justice movements, fat studies are distinct from obesity studies and bariatrics, which medicalise fat bodies and seek solutions for thinning fat bodies.

A recent overview of the field of fat theology has identified four distinct areas of study: religion and the fat body; religion and embodiment; religion and food; and religion, eating, and dieting.[70] Underpinning these areas are the ways morality is socially constructed and the moralisation of bodies. Furthermore, the church's role in informing how desire and its containment

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[67] Cooper, 'Fat Studies'.
[68] Ibid.
[69] Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, eds., *Queering Fat Embodiment*, (London: Routledge, 2016), https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315603285.
[70] Lynne Gerber, Susan Hill, and LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant, 'Religion and Fat, Protestant Christianity and Weight Loss,' *Fat Studies* 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 82–91.

is understood, suggests that the dominant understanding of thin bodies as morally superior to fat bodies is profoundly theological.[71] As an emerging field there remain many gaps in fat theology, notably a lack of intersectionality that limits its utility.[72]

Flourishing in fat theology

I have identified three approaches to flourishing in fat theology: critique of Christian weight loss programmes; focus on barriers to flourishing for fat people; and new ways of thinking about fatness that might assist fat people in their flourishing.

Christian weight loss programmes

Lynne Gerber examines flourishing as presented in evangelical Protestant Christian diet programmes in the US. She argues that these programmes require 'seemingly ascetic practices' from fat people who hope to please God through slimming.[73] She argues that this causes a conflict for Christians who want to affirm God's abundant provision for creation. The programmes tend to resolve this tension in two distinct ways. Either they embrace abundant eating while adhering to strict food guidelines that limit high calorie foods, or they embrace the variety of foods available while practicing extreme restraint through strict portion control. In both instances Gerber finds the programmes position themselves as counter-cultural, but in practice they reinforce the dominant cultural norms around food and body size within the US.[74]

Gerber's work is of limited use for examining fat flourishing. Implicit in the Christian weight loss programmes she examines is the idea that weight loss is required for fat people to flourish, an assumption Gerber does not examine or question. Further, the nuances of evangelical Protestantism in the US are missing from Gerber's work. Cultural and ethnic differences which lead to different approaches to the body and body size are missing from her work, which at best limits the usefulness of her results and at worst might contribute to ethnic and cultural erasure. This is especially important given the intersectional nature of fatphobia.

Fabio Parasecoli also examines evangelical Christian weight loss programmes in the US. He argues that because of the negative associations with fatness in US culture, where fatness is

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[71] Ibid.
[72] Ibid.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Lynne Gerber, 'The Christian Dieter's Dilemma: Abundance and Restriction in Two Christian Weight Loss Programs', *Fat Studies* 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 137.

seen as morally weak and disordered, Christians are invested in managing their body size while maintaining their Christian identity. Parasecoli focuses his work on weight loss programmes that use the Bible as an authority on how and what one should eat. These programmes promote a literalist reading of the Bible that denies nutritional science because of its reliance on evolutionary theory.[75] Parasecoli concludes that these diets will never embrace political critiques of industrialised food systems required to assist fat flourishing. Further, Parasecoli warns of potential harmful co-opting of 'Biblical diets' by the food industry because of their commercial potential.[76]

While Parasecoli's approach is useful in highlighting the political barriers to flourishing for fat people, his work fails to account for the racial, cultural, and gendered dimensions of fatness in US culture limiting the usefulness of his conclusions.

Barriers to fat flourishing

Emily Contois explores Christian language in dieting which she calls, 'the theological language of weight loss and dieting'. She argues words such as 'sacrifice' and 'commitment' moralise weight loss by positioning thinness as something that can be achieved by anyone given enough personal willpower while failing to acknowledge the 'near total failure of long-term weight loss'.[77] For Contois, fat flourishing is hampered by the way theological language positions fatness as a moral failing providing many examples to justifiy her thesis. However, she only outlines how fat flourishing is hampered and does not provide any means by which theological language might assist fat flourishing. Further, she does not determine whether weight loss is required for flourishing, only that it is often unachievable through willpower alone. This limits the usefulness of her work to determining what is required for fat flourishing but does raise an important challenge to ideas about flourishing that require fat people to lose weight.

Rethinking fat flourishing: A review of the literature

Hannah Bacon's work interrogates the use of the Christian nomenclature of sin in contemporary dieting programmes. Bacon studies an influential slimming group where foods are given a 'syn' value and limited. Bacon finds group participants disrupt the Christian understanding

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[75] Fabio Parasecoli, 'God's Diets: The Fat Body and the Bible as an Eating Guide in Evangelical Christianity', *Fat Studies* 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 141–58.
[76] Ibid.
[77] Emily J. H. Contois, 'Guilt-Free and Sinfully Delicious: A Contemporary Theology of Weight Loss Dieting', *Fat Studies* 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 112–26.

of sin by transforming fat from something that should always be avoided, to something to enjoy in moderation. She argues this challenges the belief that fatness is always bad. However, As Hannah Bacon points out, Michelle Lelwica argues that participants in weight loss programs are not consciously or sophisticatedly utilising religious language, limiting their ability to impact the use of moralised language in relation to weight loss.[78] Bacon rejects this, arguing that women critically enter weight loss.[79]

For Bacon, fat flourishing is bound up with feminist liberation theologians who argue that sin's primary association must be with structures rather than personal guilt and failure.[80] For her, fat flourishing requires a critical approach to the systemic sin of fatness and a de-emphasis on personal culpability. In her conclusion, Bacon references the work of Fiorenza who argues that systemic sin does not vindicate individuals of sin but that everyone is implicated in different ways and degrees.[81] Key to developing Bacon's work further is an intersectional approach to structural and individual sin that identifies who gets to define fatness, and to what gain.

Isherwood explores how Christian theology has framed eating and fatness historically, arguing that thinness has become a marker of successful Christian life while the denigration of fat bodies has been supported by theological language.[82] Central to her work is the image of a fat Jesus. This image is uncomfortable for many because fatness is closely associated with moral failing or imperfection. Isherwood argues this discomfort teaches us a lot about societal views of fat people while the image of fat Jesus itself provides a route to imagining aspects of the Divine which are devalued in patriarchal interpretations of the Trinity. Drawing on the work of Marcella Althaus-Reid, Isherwood's fat Jesus is an 'obscene Christ', a political tool through which the failings of normative Christology can be challenged.[83] It is through this political challenge that Isherwood pursues fat flourishing. Beyond inclusion, fat flourishing requires political engagement with normative thinking that moralises body size.

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[78] Hannah Bacon, 'Fat, Syn, and Disordered Eating: The Dangers and Powers of Excess', *Fat Studies* 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 104.
[79] Ibid, 105.
[80] Ibid.
[81] Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2001), 110.
[82] Lisa Isherwood, *The Fat Jesus: Feminist Explorations in Boundaries and Transgressions* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008).
[83] Lisa Isherwood, 'Queering Christ: Outrageous Acts and Theological Rebellions', *Literature and Theology* 15, no. 3 (1 September 2001): 249–61.

Michelle Lelwica explores what she calls the 'Religion of Thinness' asking why the 'ultimate body' is thin and who benefits from it being so.[84] This challenges the idea that thinness is required for flourishing, leading her to question the energy and time devoted to achieving thinness. For her, flourishing requires attention to purposes that are 'more ultimate' than thinness and which transcend societal pressures.[85] Instead, she argues that flourishing might be enhanced by investing time in creation myths and soteriologies that promote an appreciation of all bodies, and their creative potential to produce and perceive diversity in truth and beauty.[86] While Lelwica brings an important challenge to dominant ideas about the moral superiority of thinness, her solution, removing focus from body size, obscures the possibility that sometimes thinning the body is essential for flourishing.

Mycroft Masada's work provides a call to fat-inclusive social justice where the needs of fat people are considered in intersection with other social justice movements. For Masada fat is a racial, economic and Disability justice issue and pursuit of fat-inclusive justice is essential in the pursuit of peace and recognition of all bodies being made in the image of God.[87] However, the theology in their work is not fully developed and does not address the wealth of literature and conflicting ideas about what it means to be made in the image of God.

In summary, the fat theology that exists contributes to fat flourishing by calling for the de-moralising of fat bodies, a critical approach to understanding sin and morality as it relates to fatness, and broadening collective understandings of the Divine by rejecting non-fat bodies as normative embodiment. However, the literature available is limited both in volume and scope. Further nuance is required to consider the intersectionality of fat flourishing and fat oppression therefore, further challenging and rethinking is required.

There are many theological possibilities available to challenge dominant narratives that hinder fat flourishing. However, in this article I focus on queer theology because it provides means by which the seemingly irreconcilable positions, binary thinking, and harmful status quo found in the fat frames might be challenged.

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[84] Michelle Lelwica, 'The Religion of Thinness', *Scripta Instituti Donneriani Aboensis* 23 (1 January 2011): 257–85.
[85] Michelle Lelwica, *Starving for Salvation: The Spiritual Dimensions of Eating Problems Among American Girls and Women* (Oxford University Press, 2002).
[86] Michelle M. Lelwica, *The Religion of Thinness: Satisfying the Spiritual Hungers Behind Women's Obsession with Food and Weight* (Gurze Books, 2009).
[87] Mycroft Masada, 'Good News: A Sermon on Fat Justice', *Fat* Studies 4, no. 2 (3 July 2015): 197–207.

Fat and queer identity

While bringing queer theology and fat theology together is relatively novel, a clear precedent is set in fat studies which utilises queer theory to examine fat experience. Examples of this are found in the work of Wykes, Longhurst and LeBesco. Wykes argues that compulsory heteronormativity and compulsory thinness are 'mutually constitutive' in the ways they shape social, political, and economic life.[88] Longhurst argues that ideas about body size and desirability might be successfully queered by considering the concepts of performativity, the closet, shame and pride, and orientation so that 'slimmed bodies' are no longer viewed as the norm from which fat bodies deviate.[89] LeBesco finds overlap in three ways fat and queer bodies are perceived. Firstly, she argues that the search for a 'fat gene' parallels the controversial desire to understand the causes of homosexuality. This 'cause-seeking' rhetoric, she argues, assumes that fatness and queerness are problems which require intervention.[90] Secondly, LeBesco finds three characteristics of sexual deviance attributed to queer and fat people: animalistic, hypersexual, and over-visible. LeBesco argues that a great deal of fat stigma manifests itself in the arena of sexuality.[91] Thirdly she argues that 'the closet' operates metaphorically for fat people in the ways compulsory thinness demands repentance about their fatness and that 'coming out' for fat people means no longer passing as on-the-way-to-thin.[92]

These examples demonstrate enough overlap between fat and queer experience to justify using queer theology to challenge and rethink the fat frames. However, as Giles highlights, queering something not usually perceived to be overtly sexual rightly attracts criticism, but concludes queering usefully challenges norms that are 'extravagantly regulated' which I argue body size is.[93] However, my analysis must remain cognisant of the limitations of this approach due to the distinctions between fat and queer experience.

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[88] Jackie Wykes, 'Introduction: Why Queering Fat Embodiment?' in *Queering Fat Embodiment,* eds. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes and Samantha Murray (London: Routledge, 2014), 1.
[89] Robyn Longhurst, 'Queering Body Size and Shape: Performativity, the Closet, Shame and Orientation', in *Queering Fat Embodiment*, ed. Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes, and Samantha Murray, (Routledge, 2016).
[90] Kathleen A. LeBesco, *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2003)
[91] Ibid.
[92] Ibid.
[93] Fiona Giles, '"Relational, and Strange": A Preliminary Foray into a Project to Queer Breastfeeding', *Australian Feminist Studies* 19 (1 November 2004): 302.

Queer theology

Defining queer theology is difficult. There is no single definition of 'queer' and some queer theorists argue that a universally agreed definition of 'queer' is not easily reached because the term itself rejects stable categories and resists definition.[94] However, Slater and Cornwall have identified two groupings in which the term 'queer' is deployed within theology which are relevant to this article.[95]

Firstly, today 'queer' is commonly associated with LGBT+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other sexual and gender minorities) people. Originally meaning 'strange' the term was used as a slur for LGBT+ people but has now largely been reclaimed for use by LGBT+ communities. As an umbrella term for people who are not cisgender and/or heterosexual, 'queer' is helpful for denoting the fluidity of gender and sexual identities. Further, Cheng finds the term useful for highlighting the commonality that connects the diverse experiences of LGBT+ people.[96] From this grouping it can be argued that one understanding of queer theology is theology that is done by, for and with LGBT+ people and communities.

Secondly, queerness can be understood as an opposition or resistance to social norms. Queer theorist Halperin defines queerness as a 'positionality vis-a-vis the normative'. For example, a queer gender identity does not denote a person's identification with a stable and discreet gender category 'queer' but rejects the discreet and stable gender categories children are socialised into.[97] Queerness is not a distinct, separate and independent category but a space for that which does not fit in the mainstream. To this end, queerness is not necessarily about issues directly related to sex, gender and sexuality but can encompass all antinormativity. From this grouping queer theology can be defined as theology that contests social and theological norms.

In this article I am predominantly drawing on Slater and Cornwall's second grouping; the tradition of queer theologians who have exposed the ways in which norms and binaries in society are harmful. Given Lisa Isherwood's work on the fat body and queer theology, I have decided to narrow my exploration of queer theology to her work.

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[94] Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'*, (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2011).
[95] Jack Slater and Susannah Cornwall, 'Queer Theology.' In *St Andrews Encyclopaedia of Theology*, edited by Brendan N. Wolfe et al. University of St Andrews, 2022. https://www.saet.ac.uk/Christianity/QueerTheology.
[96] Patrick S. Cheng, *Radical Love: Introduction to Queer Theology*, 1st edition (New York: Seabury Books, 2011), 2–8.
[97] David Halperin, *Saint Foucault: Towards a Gay Hagiography* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1997), 62.

Lisa Isherwood

Lisa Isherwood's theology is rooted in feminist liberation and uses frameworks from queer theory to interpret and challenge theological concepts.[98] Through a process she describes as 'trespassing, transgressing and mining submerged knowledges,' Isherwood queers theology and expands our understanding of the divine by rejecting norms and binaries and valuing the knowledge of overlooked and marginalised communities[99]. Summarising queer theology as a political pursuit that aims to change how people think and act by rejecting binary thinking and promoting radical inclusion, Isherwood says, 'it's a refusal to be normalised[100] Importantly, Isherwood recognises there are many other valid understandings of queer theology reflecting queering's suspicion of stable categories.

Inclusion. Inclusion is an important part of Isherwood's work but is not the ultimate aim. Inclusion in systems that have hated and rejected queer people affirms the inherent dignity of queer people through which self-worth and relationship might be realised. As I have argued from my reading of Messer, these are essential for flourishing. However, the goal of queering is not inclusion in normative systems that cause harm. For this reason, queering disrupts the norm completely by asking why it is the norm, what power structures uphold it and who benefits when the status quo remains unchallenged. For example, while Isherwood celebrates the legalisation of same sex marriage in the UK, she believes that queering requires more than the important extension of rights to queer people.[101] For her, queering is not the replication of heterosexual models of relationship in queer relationships. Instead, queering marriage requires that all boundaries be challenged to destablise the norms of heterosexual marriage that uphold and reinforce heteronormative patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy. Isherwood argues that this form of queering is redemptive because it rejects narrow definitions and power systems that constrain humans and prevent them from realising their potential.[102]

Disrupting the 'straight mind'. Isherwood's queer theology starts to disrupt social norms by challenging the binaries and stable categories within them to liberate those who are excluded or oppressed by them. For example, Isherwood recognises the limitations of Christologies that

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[98] Lisa Isherwood, Lecture, 'The Changing Face of Queer Theology', The University of Edinburgh, 25 February 2021.
[99] Ibid.
[100] Ibid.
[101] Ibid.
[102] Ibid.

perpetuate the harmful effects of patriarchy and misogyny and the theological possibilities of exploring aspects of Christ outside, or counter to the 'straight mind'.[103]

For Isherwood, challenging the straight mind requires naming and disrupting unconscious and conscious ideas which holds male as the norm, values hierarchy, and consists of stable categorisations and binaries. Isherwood believes through this challenge a more 'vibrant and captivating' Christology can emerge which serves those who have been excluded or oppressed. While some may argue that this pursuit is limited by the inescapable maleness of the historical Jesus, for Isherwood queering Christ is legitimised by queer images she finds in the gospels. One such image is the incarnation which she argues is inherently queer because it disrupts stable ideas about God and power; an Almighty God laying in a manger as a helpless baby 'crying, spewing, and shitting his pristine swaddling clothes'.[104]

Naming and challenging power. Central to Isherwood's queering is naming and challenging power. In doing so she aims to subvert the social order by relocating power away from oppressive systems. For Isherwood, Christ is the template for this practice; he subverts the social order by demonstrating love in forbidden ways such as breaking bread with tax collectors and healing people on the Sabbath.[105] For Isherwood, the queer Christ makes queer theological reflection an important means by which to transgress harmful boundaries and binaries.

Pleasure ethics. For Isherwood, queer sex is an example of crossing harmful boundaries, such as heteronormativity, demonstrating the ability of pleasure to disrupt power. For Isherwood, queer sex rejects heteronormativity (which constrains queer desire) in pursuit of pleasure. Pursuing pleasure then, becomes a means by which harmful norms are disrupted and can encourage Christian Ethics to be pleasure - seeking. When the body's capacity for pleasure, rather than constrained desire, becomes a measure of ethical action, Isherwood believes that flourishing of all follows. For her, pleasure - seeking ethics requires the needs of all bodies to be met. For example, pleasure - seeking ethics requires the end of exploitative economic practices that keep and make people poor, because poverty, lack of healthcare and malnourishment deprive people of the pleasure of embodiment.[106]

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[103] Isherwood, 'Queering Christ,' 255.
[104] Ibid, 254
[105] Ibid, 258.
[106] Ibid, 259.

Epistemological flesh. Building on Sedgwick's assertion that bodily experience and knowledge can disrupt oppression, Isherwood argues LGBT+ embodiment provides a means to disrupt ideas about God.[107] She argues that being queer in a society that demands compulsory heteronormativity provides queer people with a unique body-knowledge from which aspects of the Christian tradition might be queered. For example, Isherwood highlights Kolakowski's theological reflections from a trans perspective which enhance readings of the Hebrew Bible.[108] Isherwood concludes that the epistemology of queer embodiment is key to a more expansive (and less oppressive) Christianity.[109]

Love-talk. Love is an important theme of Isherwood's work. Redemption, grace and conversion – all intensely religious experiences -- are moments of love that free people from suffering, transforming their lives with greater justice, equality, and peace.[110] Queer theology, in fact, questions theological 'love-talk'as topics for philosophical discussion, seeking instead to transform the structures that shape how love is understood with an underlying ambition to foster a theological praxis of love in action.[111] Queering expands 'love-talk' by questioning the normative and dominant power systems of colonialism, heteronormative patriarchy and white supremacy that Isherwood argues have functioned as gatekeepers to theological 'love-talk'. For instance, Isherwood highlights the work of Guillermo Cook who explores the theological richness that comes from the teachings of Maya indigenous people about solidarity, communal structures and different perspectives on sexuality and family.[112] Isherwood argues that it is rigid adherence to the normative 'love-talk' of theology that has prevented a deeper and wider understanding of God's love and that queering is an essential tool for recognising and expanding theological understanding of love.[113]

Expanding theological 'love-talk' is a political pursuit. Isherwood builds on the work of Rosemary Hennessy, who has written extensively about the politics of profit and pleasure, mapping the ways in which capitalist expansion, the politics of exclusion and environmental

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[107] Lisa Isherwood, *Introducing Body Theology: V. 2*, First Edition (Sheffield: Continuum International Publishing, 1998), 102.
[108] Isherwood, *Introducing*, 103.
[109] Ibid, 112.
[110] Marcella Althaus-Reid and Lisa Isherwood, 'Thinking Theology and Queer Theory', *Feminist Theology* 15, no. 3 (May 2007): 302–14.
[111] Ibid, 303.
[112] Ibid.
[113] Ibid, 304.

degradation are linked to heteronormative thinking.[114] Isherwood and Althaus-Reid show how this link sustains an exclusionary Christianity. For them Queer theology means learning from the margins, not the dominant norms, to expand and widen (rather than replace) existing theological understanding.

Critiques

Reflecting her feminist liberation roots, Isherwood's approach to queering focuses heavily on liberation from heteronormative patriarchy and capitalism. However, she fails to adequately address the role of white supremacy and racism. For example, some scholars link the rise of white conservative Christian interest in the family to a fear in the changing demographics of the United States, eugenics and anti-Black sentiment.[115] Indeed, marriage can be seen as a way to legitimise and privilege relationships between white people evidenced most clearly by the ban on interracial marriage that existed until 1967 in parts of the US. While Isherwood is clear that the struggles of different groups of people are intersectional, the links between white supremacy and heteronormativity could be more explicit in her work. This is pertinent to any conversation about fat flourishing because the medical and social barriers fat people face intersect with other aspects of a persons identity such as race and ethnicity. Further as Gerber et.al, have identified when reviewing theological literature that might be considered 'fat theology', there is little written by Black and Brown scholars. If the barriers faced by fat people and the solutions offered to assist fat flourishing come predominately from one group (in this case educated white women) the potential to propose solutions that only work for some fat people and even harm other fat people is credible.[116]

Conclusion

I have argued that the emerging field of fat theology has not yet comprehensively considered what is required for fat people to flourish. I have found that queer and fat experience intersect making queer theology a useful resource for assisting fat flourishing. A useful template in Isherwood's work for naming and subverting power structures that maintain harmful norms,

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[114] Rosemary Hennessy, *Profit and Pleasure: Sexual Identities in Late Capitalism*, 1st edition (New York: Routledge, 2000).
[115] Samuel L Perry et al., 'Divided by Faith (in Christian America): Christian Nationalism, Race, and Divergent Perceptions of Racial Injustice', *Social Forces* 101, no. 2 (1 December 2022): 913–42.
[116] Gerber, et al, 'Religion and Fat.'

disrupting binaries, and establishing pleasure seeking ethics. In the next part I apply Isherwood's queer theology to fat flourishing and to assess the extent to which it might assist fat flourishing.

Part three: Queering the dominant understanding of fatness to assist fat flourishing

The dominant framing of fatness in the UK is primarily shaped by the biomedical frame, which hampers the flourishing of fat people. The social justice frame challenges some of the ways the dominant understanding of fatness hampers fat flourishing successfully but in doing so generates additional barriers to fat flourishing. In this part I discuss the extent to which the approaches I found in Isherwood's queer theology might help navigate the barriers to flourishing presented in the fat frames and the seemingly irreconcilable positions they hold. To do this, I examine the barriers to flourishing I identified in part one using key themes found in Isherwood's work: inclusion, disrupting the straight mind, naming and challenging power, pleasure ethics, love-talk, and epistemology of the flesh. I conclude that Isherwood's work can challenge and bring nuance to the fat frames. In doing so, her work can assist but not fully realise fat flourishing.

Inclusion

As Isherwood finds in her queer theology, inclusion is an important aspect of flourishing for marginalised communities, such as fat people. Inclusion allows people to thrive in ways that enhance their flourishing by breaking down barriers that hamper their 'freedom in fellowship' and 'freedom for life'.[117] Inclusion requires acceptance that fat people exist and have the same intrinsic value as non-fat people as well as willingness to understand and remove the social barriers fat people experience. Fat inclusion is destigmatising and therefore can assist flourishing in relationships. Further, fat inclusion makes fat people safer, while improving access and comfort. This is essential in a world where seatbelts, life jackets and medical equipment are not made with fat bodies in mind and fat people can rarely 'sink in' to environments designed for non-fat bodies.[118]

A populist argument against this inclusion is the concern that it might encourage unhealthy lifestyles resulting in more fat people further straining social and healthcare services. However, research suggests that fat exclusion and shaming is harmful (and therefore costly) to health. [119] In

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[117] Messer, 'Flourishing,' 289.
[118] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, Electronic book (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 152.
[119] Tomiyama et al., 'How.'

effect, those against a more fat-inclusive world on the grounds of degrading health and the associated cost contribute to the problem they hope to solve. A pragmatic solution would be recognising that fat people's existence demands their inclusion to prevent health and social problems arising from exclusion. Though this approach would be pragmatic, it requires further thought to acknowledge the implicit ideologies, such as capitalism and ableism, that uphold the belief that a person's value is associated with their health and ability to be productive and independent.

Isherwood is clear that inclusion is not the ultimate goal of queering.[120] For this reason, inclusion alone is insufficient for fat flourishing. Isherwood prompts theologians to look beyond inclusion to consider structures in which queer people exist and are understood. For fat people, flourishing is not realised when inclusion means affording privilege in systems that continue to oppress others. For example, fat flourishing is not realised through size-inclusive hiring practices that are racist or homophobic. It is not realised through size-inclusive clothing produced in sweatshops with high environmental and human cost. Fat flourishing is not realised through fat-friendly seating at venues with no wheelchair access. Rather, flourishing is assisted when the needs of fat people are considered and met in systems that promote the flourishing of all.

Messer's distinction of penultimate and ultimate flourishing complicates Isherwood's argument about inclusion. Penultimate flourishing will always be incomplete because it is not ultimate and therefore the ability to flourish in the ways described in Isherwood's work is limited. For example, in the UK, the ability to escape unfair systems is limited. Having a job might assist someone's flourishing by providing money to meet their basic needs. This would be true for any job paying a living wage and would not be negated by the function of the company paying the wage even when that function hampered the flourishing of others. Perhaps a stronger argument would be that inclusion in systems that oppress others does not lead to complete personal flourishing and that this complete flourishing is not achievable in the penultimate. However, I believe that a fatalist approach to flourishing is unhelpful, so the goal of inclusion should maintain the goal of ensuring systems and structures are fair for everyone, even if our collective ability to achieve this in the penultimate is limited.

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[120] 'Lisa Isherwood - The Changing Face of Queer Theology', Media Hopper Create, accessed 30 May 2023.

While fat inclusion has the power to remove the social barriers fat people face, there are times when fatness itself hampers flourishing so further nuance is required. Better suited to this task might be Disability theology, especially that which draws on the work of Shakespeare and his treatment of impairment, rather than Disability, to address the ways fatness itself can be a barrier to flourishing.[121]

In summary, Isherwood's work on inclusion assists fat flourishing when it removes social barriers for fat people that increases their comfort, participation in society, ability to flourish in relationships, and safety. This flourishing is not about gaining power in oppressive systems. While inclusion is essential for fat flourishing, alone it is insufficient to realise the fullness of flourishing. This is especially true when the fat body (and not social barriers) hamper flourishing. Other theologies, in particular Disability theology, might further assist fat flourishing where this is the case.

Disrupting the straight mind

A central part of Isherwood's queering is disrupting the 'straight mind'. Her approach to this is a destablising questioning of the status quo, binaries, and stable categorisations. Intrinsically linked to this is interrogating the power structures that operate within the status quo and to whose benefit or detriment. I address this in the next section, though I recognise that Isherwood's approach to queering would not separate these in praxis. Through this questioning, Isherwood argues, harmful systems and structures can be deconstructed and repurposed for the flourishing of all. This process provides a template through which theologians might engage with the seemingly irreconcilable positions held within the fat frames. This is useful for challenging and rethinking diametrically opposed positions and finding different solutions to aid fat flourishing.

Fatness and health

The biomedical and social justice frames lead to opposing views about the impact of fatness on health. The biomedical frame argues that fatness is always unhealthy, and the social justice frame argues that health can be achieved at any body size. While there is much evidence that fat bodies can be healthy, fatness can also degrade a person's health.[122] Therefore, I reject the binary

[121] Shakespeare, 'Social,' 199.
122 Linda Bacon and Lindo Bacon, *Health At Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*, (BenBella Books, 2010).

positions of both frames and argue that the relationship between fatness and health cannot be satisfactorily assumed into one stable category. Fatness is neither always nor never unhealthy. For this reason, body size alone can never be used to determine the health of a person. Instead, the complex and multifaceted contributing factors to health must be used to determine health on an individual and contextual basis.

This disruption of the 'straight mind' destabilises the categorisation of fatness and health providing a more nuanced understanding to assist fat flourishing. I argue that queering can increase fat people's capacity 'for freedom for life' and 'freedom in fellowship', both of which Messer argues are integral to human flourishing.[123] A more nuanced approach to fatness and health would combat medical stigma and its negative impact on morbidity by preventing assumptions that lead to the under and over diagnosis of disease in fat people, positively impacting their mortality. Furthermore, this destablisation challenges the biomedical position that fatness is always unhealthy while resisting the social justice position that fatness is never unhealthy and never impairs flourishing.

However, decisions about public health campaigns and spending need to be made at population level and may assist fat flourishing. In constrained healthcare systems pragmatic decisions are made based on generalisations from large population samples in which the nuance of individual experience is obscured. For this reason, arguing that all medical decisions should be made at individual level is currently unrealistic in practice. Further, as I later argue, Isherwood's queering also requires examination of the power structures that inform decision making and to whose benefit.

Therefore, I argue that care should be taken to ensure that the individual is not lost in generalisations when medical decisions are made. One example might be rejecting the use of the BMI scale as a proxy for an individual's health in favour of an individualised and contextual approach. This is not just a change in biomedical ethics. It is theologically significant because it reflects the personal nature of God's relationship with humanity. God's good purpose for creation is not simply for humans collectively; God relates to each person individually and cares specifically for their personal flourishing.

123 Messer, 'Flourishing,' 292.

Socially, a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between fatness and health would challenge the stigmatising language of the 'obesity epidemic' that places fat people at the centre of a moral panic by suggesting they are contagious, to be feared, and a drain on constrained healthcare resources. I argue this would improve fat people's ability to flourish in interpersonal relationships, an essential part of flourishing for Messer. While some medical professionals argue that the moralised health language of the obesity epidemic is essential for funding, examining other diseases provides evidence that this is not always the case.[124] For example, cancer, which attracts the most research funding of all diseases, does not rely on moralised language, while HIV/AIDS, one of the most moralised diseases, has struggled to attract the funding needed for research.[125] This has led the UN to argue that diseases that disproportionally impact marginalised groups (regardless of language used) are commonly overlooked for funding.[126] Therefore, I argue that the moralised language of the obesity epidemic should be rejected to assist fat flourishing and that Isherwood's queer theology is a useful means to achieve this.

In summary, I believe that Lisa Isherwood's concept, 'disrupting the straight mind' helpfully challenges the dominant understanding of fatness and health in the UK and provides means by which it can be reimagined. Specifically, disrupting the straight mind provides a more nuanced understanding of fatness and health disrupting the current single stable position. Fatness can degrade health, but because fatness is not always unhealthy health cannot be assessed simply by weighing someone. This nuanced understanding might promote fat flourishing by reducing social and medical fatphobia, enhancing fat people's capacity for freedom in life and freedom in fellowship.

Furthermore, while population - level generalisations are essential for making public health decisions, the inclination to understand these generalisations as true and stable categories must be resisted so that the context of each individual is not lost. This is especially important to theologians who believe God's good purposes are for each individual, not simply humanity as a whole.

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[124] Wilding, Mooney, and Pile, 'Should'4258.; Ruth Levine and Nandini Oomman, 'Global HIV/AIDS Funding and Health Systems: Searching for the Win-Win', *JAIDS Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes* 52 (November 2009): S3.
[125] Levine and Oomman, 'Global HIV/AIDS Funding and Health Systems'.
[126] Bolajoko Olusanya, 'Dismantling Structural Discrimination in Global Health', *JAMA Pediatrics* 175, no. 10 (October 2021): 993–94.

Weight Loss

When fatness impairs health, flourishing is hampered, and intervention might be required. The biomedical frame presents weight loss through diet and exercise as the simple and achievable solution to health degradation caused by fatness. However, the social justice frame argues that weight loss should never be pursued because of its low efficacy and ability to degrade health. These seemingly irreconcilable positions are helped through disruption of the straight mind. In rejecting the binary stable categorisations in each frame, a more nuanced approach emerges. From this position it can be argued that weight loss is sometimes critical to flourishing because of the extent to which fatness has become a barrier to flourishing. Given that weight loss carries risks, a cost-benefit assessment is required to ascertain the ability of weight loss to assist flourishing for any one individual. This means that prescribing weight loss should not be the blanket approach to all fat people.

Implicit in the biomedical frame is the belief that people can affect their own body size through eating and exercise. This is a stable belief in the UK today, that many would perceive to be factual and uncontroversial. However, the relationship between body size and eating/exercising is complicated by the many external factors that contribute to fatness.[127]

There are times when weight loss might assist flourishing; however, all weight loss interventions come with risks which positively correlate with their effectiveness (for example, bariatric surgery is both riskier and more effective than attending a diet class).[128] Returning to Messer, I would argue that weight loss has the potential to become an ultimate goal, and therefore idolatrous, when the risks of pursuing weight loss outweigh the benefit to penultimate flourishing, or when the efficacy of the intervention is low and so pursuing flourishing by that means is futile. Further, Messer argues that acceptance of our imperfection in the penultimate is essential to flourishing. Consequentially, decisions about weight loss and risk must acknowledge penultimate imperfection and the need to consider flourishing broadly.

Therefore, I find Isherwood's queering a helpful means by which the biomedical and social justice positions on weight loss can be rejected. This is important given the potential of both approaches to weight loss to either enhance or hamper flourishing. Disrupting the straight mind

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[127] Bacon and Bacon, *Health*; Jacquet et al., 'How Dieting'.
[128] David E. Arterburn et al., 'Benefits and Risks of Bariatric Surgery in Adults: A Review', *JAMA* 324, no. 9 (1 September 2020): 879–87.

allows for a more nuanced understanding of weight loss which recognises that weight loss is not always required for flourishing, and is complicated by its efficacy and associated risks, as well as the need to accept our imperfection in the penultimate.

Summary: disrupting the straight mind

Isherwood's 'disruption of the straight mind' can be used to challenge and add nuance to the seemingly irreconcilable positions within the fat frames. This assists fat flourishing by challenging the idea that fatness is always unhealthy and must always be reduced through weight loss, reducing stigma. Through the reduction of stigma, I have argued that fat flourishing is assisted in medical and interpersonal spheres. Doing so requires the unique contexts and experiences of fat people to be considered, reflecting God's desire for individual *and* collective flourishing.

A limitation of my use of Isherwood's 'disruption of the straight mind' is its potential to stigmatise chronically ill and Disabled people. By arguing that weight loss can assist fat flourishing by improving health, I recognize health as an element of flourishing. As I have already argued, fat flourishing is not assisted by including fat people in systems that oppress others, so it is important to make a distinction in my argument. Rejecting a negative correlation health and fatness does not assist fat flourishing by asserting that all fat people are healthy or that fatness never negatively impacts health. This would marginalise chronically ill and Disabled people and only benefit those fat people who could demonstrate their 'good health'. Instead, I argue that when dominant ideas about the relationship between health and fatness are challenged, stigmatizing assumptions about fat people can be avoided in favour of seeing, treating, and relating to the whole person. I believe this would enhance fat people's ability to flourish in relationships and in pursuing a life in-line with God's good purposes for creation. However, as I have already discussed, a base level of health is required for flourishing. Determining this base line and recognising the structures that shape the normative understanding of health is important. Where there may be commonality in this baseline, such as having enough food to eat, purporting to define it completely denies the different contexts and experiences of all people. The result? A stabilised categorisation which queer theology resists. Queering may not reject all stable categories, but it strongly asserts that stable categories should always be contested.

In disrupting formally stable categorisations, I have presented spectrums along which contextual decisions must be made to assist fat flourishing. This presents new questions: When is fatness healthy or unhealthy? When does intentional weight loss hamper or assist fat flourishing?

Determining who gets to answer these questions and which ideologies inform their decisions is important because each decision has the potential to enhance or hamper the flourishing of individuals and populations.

Naming and challenging power

Isherwood's queer theology provides a means by which the social order might be subverted, relocating power away from oppressive systems. This is achieved by identifying power structures operating within oppressive systems, how they operate, and who is harmed or benefitted by their function. The next step is to transgress the boundaries within these systems to relocate power away from the status quo. This step is essential in ensuring Isherwood's queer theology remains a political project that can change the way people think and act.

As I have argued, many of the ideas held about fatness in the UK are shaped by three frames rather than being purely factual. In turn, these frames are shaped by stakeholders and systems of power that privilege and promote approaches to fatness which benefit some and marginalise others. For example, Strings and Taylor identify the ways in which white supremacy has contributed to the moralisation of body size.[129] By recognising that the 'thin ideal' provided a way for white women to distance themselves from black women, whom they considered morally inferior, the idea that fatness is a moral failing can be disrupted. Similarly, recognising that fatphobia is gendered provides evidence that dominant ideas about fatness are culturally created and not stable truths. After recognising the power structures that shape ideas about fatness, the boundaries they create can be transgressed and reimagined in ways that promote flourishing rather than oppress. Examples of how this might assist fat flourishing can be found in two important areas: fatness and self-care, and fatness and sin.

<u>Quantifying self-care</u>

Caring for the body is important because achieving a basic level of health is essential for flourishing. On the other hand, a preoccupation with self-care risks becoming an ultimate goal that Messer argues is idolatrous. Fat flourishing lies somewhere between the extremes of not taking care of the body and caring about the body too much. Any attempt to quantify an appropriate level

[129] Strings, *Fearing*; Sonya Renee Taylor, *Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Oakland, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018).

of self-care risks simplifying the broad contexts in which fat people live as well as their nuanced experience and diverse intersectionalities.

Isherwood addresses this tension in '*The Fat Jesus'* when she engages the later Protestant Reformers on the body.[130] On one hand the Reformers hold the body as centrally important, recognising the importance of Jesus's incarnation and the body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, while at the same time being suspicious of the body and cautious about the amount of attention that should be given to it. By engaging the later Protestant Reformers, Isherwood identifies the shaping effect of Roman Catholic practice as the Reformers attempt to distance their position from Rome.[131] She identifies that thoughts about fat bodies and care for the body have been unstable over time and influenced by a contextual and cultural attempt to understand the Bible. This highlights the need to critically examine the powers that influence how tensions about fat bodies are navigated.

A large amount of time dedicated to thinning the body might be essential to the flourishing of a person who is severely limited by their fatness, while weight loss that is pursued at any cost with little health benefit might be considered idolatrous. Isherwood's queering encourages theologians to go a step further and ask who gets to decide where the cutoff point between flourishing and idolatry might be, the assumptions underlying that position, and who it benefits or harms. This could mean identifying and rejecting heteronormative patriarchal power structures that regulate women's bodies strictly; after all, a wider range of body sizes are perceived as normal for men than women.[132] However, by examining power structures and their influence over populations, a distinction between health that promotes flourishing in line with God's good purposes and an understanding of flourishing shaped by cultural norms is needed. For example, an understanding of flourishing that places a higher judgement value on lives that are materially productive and pursuits that require physical strength are rooted in capitalism and ableism. This leads me to conclude that those impaired by fatness can flourish by pursuing God's good purposes for their life while simultaneously failing to meet cultural expectations of flourishing. Therefore, the answer to when self-care becomes idolatrous will always be contextual and those with the power to determine this cut off point (and their motivation) will need to be examined.

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[130] Isherwood, 'Fat Jesus,' 57–59.
[131] Ibid, 59.
[132] Alan Feingold and Ronald Mazzella, 'Gender Differences in Body Image Are Increasing', *Psychological Science* 9, no. 3 (1 May 1998): 190–95.

Fatness and sin

The dominant understanding of fatness in the UK argues that fatness is primarily a moral failing of individuals who fail to control their appetite and succumb to laziness. Fat bodies are perceived to be personally sinful; fat people are thought of as weak-willed, having given in to the temptations of gluttony and sloth. However, as I have already argued, many factors impact someone's body size, and a single cause of fatness is rarely determinable. Some factors, which are largely beyond the individual's control, are systemic, such as socio-economic status. This demonstrates the role of systemic sin in relation to fatness. Therefore, I reject the position that all fatness is created by or evidences personal sin. However, sometimes personal sin can lead to fatness, for example through consuming food in volumes that is abusive to oneself and detrimental to flourishing. Therefore, I also reject the social justice position that all fatness is neutral and never resultant from personal sin. However, even in my example of overeating, the personal and structural are often inextricable; for example, overeating might be greedy and therefore personally sinful, equally it might be caused by trauma or Big Food's investment in making ultra processed foods addictive and therefore structurally sinful.[133] Though this is complex, I believe this nuance strengthens my argument that body size alone can never be used as a reliable indicator of personal sin.

Transgressing ideas about fatness and personal sin allows theologians to examine the role of systemic sin and oppression relating to fatness. Research has shown that poverty is the leading cause of fatness in the UK today.[134] This means that fat bodies are created and shaped by systemic inequalities and injustice.[135] Yet neo-liberal government policies to reduce obesity focus on elements of fatness that individuals are responsible for such as their eating and movement.[136] This burdens fat people with a problem they are not completely in control of and obscures the government's responsibility.[137]

The status quo equates fatness and personal sin, but Isherwood's queer theology provides a means by which these ideas might be transgressed. Doing so highlights the levels of systemic

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[133] Ashley N. Gearhardt and Alexandra G. DiFeliceantonio, 'Highly Processed Foods Can Be Considered Addictive Substances Based on Established Scientific Criteria', *Addiction* 118, no. 4 (2023): 589–98.
[134] Baker, 'Obesity Statistics.'
[135] Kwan, 'Framing.'
[136] 'Tackling Obesity: Empowering Adults and Children to Live Healthier Lives', GOV.UK, accessed 9 May 2024.
[137] Kwan, 'Framing the Fat Body'.

failures and barriers that impact fat people. I argue that these barriers represent the significant systemic sin operating in relation to fatness. I believe that naming and recognising this systemic sin assists fat flourishing by unburdening fat people from the ways in which they have been moralised, without taking an absolutist approach that denies all personal sins. However, I believe that the main way this transgressing assists flourishing is by identifying the need for interventions that promote fat flourishing to target structural as well as personal sin.

In summary, I argue that it is important to disrupt narratives that relate fatness exclusively to a personal moral failing. However, I do not go as far as the social justice movement to argue that fatness is never a result of personal sin. More pressing, I argue, is careful consideration of the systemic influences and stakeholders that negatively impact fat people's flourishing. This is important given stakeholders' power to influence government policy and individual's choices especially as they have significant financial incentive to uphold the dominant narrative that fatness is a personal and not systemic moral failing.

Summary: naming and challenging power

Naming and challenging the powers that shape and uphold the dominant understanding of fatness in the UK is essential for fat flourishing. Firstly, it disrupts harmful norms by rejecting the objectivity and neutrality of the status quo. Secondly, it helps identify the moments of disruption and challenge that need to take place to assist fat flourishing. For example, understanding that fatness can be both a personal and systemic failing (as well as neutral) informs the interventions needed to assist fat flourishing. Systemic changes require more than personal endeavor. To this end, Isherwood's queer theology is well suited to assisting fat flourishing. However, given that other theologies, such as feminist liberation theology, also have a strong tradition of challenging harmful and dominant power structures, fat theology should not rely on queer theology alone in this task.

Fat joy and pleasure ethics

Isherwood's examination of queer sex provides a template through which a new mode of ethical decision making might be imagined. Similarly, I believe that when fat people pursue joy (rather than slimming) a pleasure-orientated ethics can emerge. For me, this can be seen most clearly in fat liberation spaces that promote 'joyful movement'.

Joyful movement is an approach often coupled with 'intuitive eating', which challenges the idea that fat people must eat less and move more disrupting the negative way food and exercise is viewed in relation to fat bodies. In fat activist spaces, joyful movement provides access to exercise that is not about weight loss, earning food or punishing the body. Joyful movement promotes inclusion for all bodies in physical activity, challenging social expectations about exercise. This disruption allows for the inclusion of groups who face additional barriers to exercise, such as Disabled and fat people. Further, for movement to be joyful, the basic needs of a body, such as nourishment and safety, must be met. Therefore, following Isherwood's argument for pleasure-oriented ethics, joyful movement becomes a call to ethical action and flourishing for all.

Through participating in joyful movement, as with any form of exercise, strength and fitness can be improved. However, the joyful movement groups I researched encourage an approach in which pleasure rather than increased fitness is the goal.[138] This separates pleasure and improving fitness in a way that they are not always separated in fat people's lives. For example, improving functional movement might enable a person to participate in an activity that they enjoy, though I would argue it is also important to disrupt ableist ideas about the level of physical activity and independence required for pleasure. Therefore, I argue that joyful movement requires further problemetising. While joyful movement can improve a person's fitness, not all movement necessary for assisting flourishing through improved fitness will be joyful.

Joyful movement's approach to exercise assists fat flourishing by destablising harmful ideas about fat people and physical activity that have moralised exercise. It provides a space in which fat people can enjoy moving their bodies and benefit from exercise. This may also increase a participant's fitness, making other activities more pleasurable. However, Isherwood's argument for a pleasure - orientated Christian ethics demands ethical action that reaches beyond the intersection of fat experience and exercise. For example, the pleasure of future generations and their ability to move joyfully demands action on the climate crisis. Therefore, I argue, Isherwood's queer theology can assist flourishing by identifying the importance of pleasure as an ethical ideal. Joyful movement is a practical example of this for fat people but would require further queering to resist the idea that all movement must be joyful or that joyful movement and improving fitness are distinct.

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[138] Summer Michaud-Skog, *Fat Girls Hiking: An Inclusive Guide to Getting Outdoors at Any Size or Ability* (Portland, Oregon: Timber Press, 2022).; 'Body Home Fat Dance', Body Home Fat Dance, accessed 6 August 2023.

Love-talk and Epistemological Flesh

Relating Isherwood's love-talk to fat people is complicated and requires caution. As I have already stated, the experiences of fat and queer people overlap but are distinct. Isherwood's love-talk is explicitly linked to queer people because Christianity has marginalised queer people and relationships. This has not been the same for fat people. However, it is important to note that queer and fat people are not necessarily separate groups; people can be both fat and queer. It remains, though, that distinctions in fat and queer experience limit the efficacy and ethics of using Isherwood's love-talk to assist fat flourishing. Further, in part two, I discussed the work of Wykes who argues heteronormativity and fatphobia are 'mutually constitutive' meaning that (at least in part) destabilising systems that sustain exclusionary Christian praxis assists the flourishing of queer people and also assists fat flourishing.[139] However, perhaps the most powerful way love-talk can assist fat flourishing is in its call to learn from the margins to expanding theological understanding - a theme developed in Isherwood's 'epistemological flesh'.

Isherwood's queer theology privileges the overlooked epistemology of queer embodiment, finding it a useful means through which theological understanding can be expanded. Isherwood applies this approach to fat bodies in her work *The Fat Jesus*. As I have already argued, fat flourishing is assisted when fat experiences challenge normative thinking (theological or otherwise) to de-moralise fat people. Further, this aspect of Isherwood's queer theology assists fat flourishing by challenging the idea that fat bodies cannot be trusted. Diet and exercise interventions often require people to ignore or overcome the signals their body gives them, for example ignoring hunger cues or 'pushing through' bodily discomfort when exercising. In this context, privileging the epistemology of fat embodiment assists fat flourishing by co-creating a more expansive theological understanding in which traditionally marginalised and overlooked communities are valued.

My brief exploration of love-talk and epistemological flesh reflects the complex nature of applying Isherwood's queer theory to fat experience. Indeed, each one of these sections merits its own article. While these sections are harder to relate directly to problemetising the dominant understanding of fatness to assist fat flourishing, they provide means by which the power structures invested in upholding the dominant understanding of fatness might be challenged. This is essential

[139] Wykes, 'Introduction.'

to fat flourishing. However, I remain conscious of the need to carefully navigate the distinctions of fat and queer experience so that my pursuit of fat flourishing does not erase queer people and their distinct experiences by abstracting Isherwood's work completely from its primary purpose.

Conclusion

In this part I have discussed the extent to which Isherwood's queer theology might provide means to challenge and rethink the dominant understanding of fatness to assist fat flourishing. I have found Isherwood's queer theology useful for navigating the seemingly irreconcilable positions in the fat frames to assist fat flourishing in four ways. Firstly, Isherwood's queer theology justifies fat people's inclusion in systems that work for all. Secondly, her work provides a template for rejecting fat people as homogenous, which de-moralises them and reduces stigma. Thirdly Isherwood's work provides a means to critically examine power structures that impact fat flourishing. And finally, my application of Isherwood's queer theology highlights the importance of valuing the experiences and pleasure of fat people to inform ethical action and expand theological thinking.

In these ways Isherwood's work can assist fat people's penultimate flourishing by enhancing their capacity for (and reducing barriers to) relationship with God, creation and themselves; removing barriers to pursuing God's good purposes for their lives; and helping them recognise the penultimate nature of fat flourishing.

However, my application of Isherwood's queer theology to fat flourishing has limitations. In my attempt to present a clearly structured argument I have separated out aspects of Isherwood's work that are not necessarily distinct in her writing or practice. For example, rethinking the relationship between fatness and health requires its stable categorisation to be disrupted *and* the power systems operating within it to be challenged, processes I separate in my analysis. In praxis the processes in Isherwood's queering would likely take place interconnectedly.

More crucially, differences in fat and queer lives means that the frameworks in Isherwood's queer theology are not perfectly suited to fat flourishing and suggesting they do risks queer erasure. Further, fat experience overlaps with other theological approaches therefore the limitations of using Isherwood's work to assist fat flourishing might be mitigated when it is used alongside other theologies.

Part Four: Conclusions and Recommendations

In the UK today, three frames shape how fatness and fat people are understood. These distinct frames agree that fat people face barriers to flourishing; however they define and approach these barriers differently. Each frame's approach partially assists fat flourishing: the free-market frame offers means by which government paternalism might be resisted; the biomedical frame offers means by which the impairing nature of fatness might be mitigated; the social justice frame offers means by which the social barriers fat people face might be removed. However, each of these approaches is too narrow to address the complex ways in which fat flourishing is hampered. Further, the frames create additional barriers to fat flourishing by creating rigid understandings of fat people that do not reflect the complexities of fat people's lives. These stable categorisations present seemingly irreconcilable positions which leave those pursuing fat flourishing with a lack of nuanced options and competing ideologies to navigate. This means that pursuing fat flourishing requires knowledge, energy and skill that might not be available equitably. Messer's understanding of flourishing further emphasises the narrowness, and therefore inadequacy, of fat flourishing as presented in the fat frames.

In this article I have argued that the fat frames need to be disrupted, challenged and reimagined so that a more nuanced route to flourishing can be realised. I have argued that Isherwood's queer theology provides a useful means through which this reimagining can begin.

Examining Isherwood, I have found that inclusion is essential for fat flourishing but not sufficient. Isherwood's approach makes clear that inclusion in systems that oppress others should not be the goal and should not be considered flourishing, an argument complicated by nature of penultimate human existence. Despite this complication, I agree with Isherwood's argument that oppressed groups should not be satisfied with their inclusion in unfair systems but work towards a world in which everyone can flourish.

Flourishing is hampered by the dominant understanding of fatness in the UK; however, Isherwood's work helps challenge the status quo. This results in a nuanced approach to fat people which promotes the importance of their context in the pursuit of flourishing. I believe this is essential for de-moralising fat people and reducing stigma, two of the most pervasive barriers to fat flourishing I have discussed. However, the extent to which Isherwood's queer theology can assist in this task is limited if stigma is only reduced by distancing fat people from ill-health. To remove these barriers, it is essential to understand the power structures which shape and uphold

the dominant understanding of fatness and to what end. Isherwood's work provides the theory and means by which this might be approached in her endeavour to name and challenge systems of power that hamper queer flourishing.

Beyond disrupting the harmful dominant understanding of fatness, Isherwood provides a counter cultural call to privilege the knowledge and experience of fat people. Not only does this have the power to expand the current understandings of the Divine, but it can also inform ethical action by centering fat pleasure and fat joy.

I conclude that Lisa Isherwood's queer theology successfully challenges the harmful framing of fatness in the UK and provides a means by which fatness can be reimagined to assist fat flourishing. Although I have argued this is limited by the distinctions between fatness and queerness, I believe that there is enough overlap to warrant my application of Isherwood's queer theology to the question of fat flourishing. Further, a robust precedent is set in fat studies which regularly utilises queer theory.

I believe that this work is not only successful but important. Over half the UK population is fat and this is increasing, a trend that is reflected globally.[140] Therefore, most people in the UK are directly impacted by the way fatness is framed. Furthermore, because fatness has health and social care implications and affects how all bodies are perceived, the fat frames impact everyone. How fatness is understood shapes the approaches and interventions to fat people that society will prioritise. Pragmatically, this matters in a constrained healthcare system in which difficult resource allocation decisions must be made. A negative and moralised view of fatness risks belief that fat people are less worthy of care than non-fat people, further marginalising those whose fatness is in part caused by systemic sin.

However, my argument reaches beyond the pragmatic; at its heart it is about the inherent dignity of all people and their ability to flourish. For this reason, fat flourishing is profoundly theological and warrants consideration within Christianity.

In this article I have stopped short of making specific recommendations about practical ways fat flourishing might be assisted. Instead, I have presented how decisions about fat flourishing might be tackled and argued that a personal and contextual approach that recognises the wholeness of fat people and the ways they are constrained by systemic sin must be taken. To

[140] World Health Organization, '[Obesity and Overweight]', accessed 9 May 2024.

make this more useful in practice, further work might explore case studies and real-world examples of Isherwood's queering to better understand what might be done differently to assist fat flourishing.

Queer theology alone cannot complete the task of realising fat flourishing. Further research is needed to explore how flourishing is assisted where fat and queer experience do not overlap. There are many theological possibilities for this, but Disability theology represents a useful next step for assisting fat flourishing.

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