1. A New Subject?

We live in an imperfect world, and there is not too much we can change about that. That is why St Augustine was particularly displeased with Pelagius' heretical theology, which laid too much stress on people's good will as the means to eternal salvation. In his bitter controversy with Julian of Eclanum, undoubtedly the Pelagian opponent he feared most, he emphatically reminds us about the misery of the world and its necessary connection with original sin, an aspect totally denied by the all too optimistic Pelagians.¹

Surely you must feel pain and suffering, since you do not find what to answer and since you do not want to change your depraved opinion which inevitably compels you to place in your oh so beautiful world the blind, the one-eyed, the cross-eyed, the deaf, the mute, the lame, the deformed, the distorted, the wormy, the leprous, the paralysed, the epileptic and those who are deficient in various other ways—some even look monstrous to us, because of their extreme ugliness and the horrible strangeness of their limbs. And what shall I say about the faults of souls, which make some lustful by nature, others short-tempered, others forgetful, some slow of mind, and others out of their mind and so foolish

¹ See Kellenberger (2011b) on Augustine and mental impairment.
that a human being would rather live with cattle than with that sort of human beings. To all this, you have to add the woes of women in childbed, the crying of newborns, the torments of those who suffer, the labours of the feeble, agonies suffered when dying, and so much more dangers for those who live.

(Augustine, Contra Secundam Iuliani Responsionem Opus Imperfectum 6, 16)

This relentless wordlist is familiar to the twenty-first century reader: a file of disabilities from head to foot with regard to physical aspects, while mental impairment is presented in a separate-but-equal enumeration. Augustine’s outrage ends with an assertion that, in its own way, is also modern: that there is something that qualifies as unjustifiable suffering, and to which we should not shut our eyes.

Augustine’s list raises a question about our title, which refers to impaired bodies. But, like Augustine’s text, our book also discusses what we take to be impaired minds. Yet if we dwell for a moment on how foreign is the country that we call the past, rather than on cross-historical themes, we can say that our title remains legitimate: to talk about separate mental and physical differences is modern (post-Cartesian) and retrospective. Certainly, for the medical doctors of Antiquity such as Galen and Celsus, mental states are organic aspects of bodily disposition. The body, broadly speaking, has primacy: the ultimate importance of mental states in medicine is as indicators of the health of physical ones, particularly (but not exclusively) that of the brain. Moreover, mental impairments are on the whole dispositional: they do not define personhood in the modern, Lockean sense, as a life-to-death state. Nevertheless, by the same token, mental states cannot be excluded from our discussion.

Be that as it may, Augustine’s systematic list fits into a long tradition: from Mesopotamian and Egyptian diagnostic handbooks of the second and the beginning of the first millennium BCE to the proverbial Latin a capite ad calcem—from head to foot. As such, and without pre-empting the question of how far one may match today’s categories against those of the past, this list can serve as a leitmotiv for the present book on disabilities in Roman Antiquity. Starting at the head, Chris F. Goodey and Lynn Rose describe how

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2 See Goodey (2011).
3 The Mesopotamian handbook from about 1000 BCE is a compilation which goes back to a much older tradition. See Heessel (2000) and Kellenberger (2011a) 27. The Edwin Smith Papyrus, an ancient Egyptian medical text, is the oldest known surgical treatise on trauma, and dates from 1500 BCE. See Breasted (1991).
4 The expression occurs with Vitruvius, De architectura 10, 15, 6 (a capite ... ad imam calcem) but became proverbial with Erasmus, Adagia 137 (a capite usque ad calcem).