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**Review of Elizabeth Barnes' *The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability* (OUP)**

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Elizabeth Barnes' engaging and important book on disability can be seen as comprising three parts. First, she defends a novel social constructionist account of physical disability. (Unless otherwise stated, and following Barnes, all further mentions of 'disability' in this review refer to 'physical disability'.) Disability is a social category the boundaries of which are determined by the rule-based solidarity judgements of the disability rights movement. Second, she defends a 'mere-difference' conception of disability. Being disabled is not something that intrinsically makes someone worse off – disability is neutral with respect to an individual's overall well-being. To be disabled is to have a minority body. Third, she argues that dismissals of disabled people's testimony are unwarranted and unjust. We should take seriously the claims that disabled people make about valuing and being proud of their disability.

Each part of Barnes' book makes a significant contribution to the existing literature on disability. Taken together, and in 200 pages, the book poses a significant challenge to entrenched understandings of several key aspects of disability. Barnes' arguments are consistently clear and rigorous. Her discussions of the existing literature and her engagement with her interlocutors are generally careful and concise. Barnes demonstrates how analytic philosophy can be brought fruitfully to bear on discussions of disability. On the whole, *The Minority Body* is an excellent book that deserves to be widely read and included in course syllabi.

My review comprises three sections. In each, I briefly summarise Barnes' arguments and enter some concerns about them

**Social construction**

Chapter 1 ('Constructing Disability') is the first part of Barnes' book. Here, Barnes provides a social constructionist account of disability. She aims for explanatory unity – to explain what the myriad conditions which are regarded as disabilities have in common with each other (p. 12). Barnes situates her account in relation to two prominent types of accounts of disability. She rejects naturalistic accounts which explain disability in terms of features of disabled bodies, and accounts that are part of the family of views known as the 'social model' which explain disability in terms of social prejudice. By focusing exclusively on the body or on social prejudice, respectively, these accounts tend to deliver implausible verdicts about what disability is. They are either over- or under-inclusive (pp. 13-38). Barnes' own account of disability draws lessons from Sally Haslanger's idea of an ameliorative project. An ameliorative project seeks to identify the legitimate purposes that we might have (if any) in categorising people in certain ways (such as on the basis of

race, gender or, in this case, disability), and aims to develop concepts that would help us achieve these ends (Haslanger 2012). Barnes begins by suggesting that disability as a social category has been useful for disabled people when organising themselves in a civil rights struggle (Barnes 2016, p. 41). She proceeds to specify an account according to which ‘disability *just is* whatever the disability rights movement is promoting justice for’ (p. 43).

Barnes is careful to note that the disability rights movement (DRM) is not monolithic, and its members are not inviolable disability determiners. Instead of actual judgements, Barnes builds her account upon the *rules* undergirding the DRM’s judgements. These rules employ cluster-concept reasoning – the DRM tends to count a condition as a disability if it has some sufficient number of features such as being stigmatised, making daily tasks difficult or challenging, causing chronic pain, accessibility problems or shame, requiring assistive technologies or medical care, among others. On Barnes’ account, whether an individual has a disability is partly determined by what her body is like *and* partly by how it is viewed by others (p. 47). Insofar as Barnes’ account occupies the middle ground between the accounts she rejects, it potentially avoids the problems besetting them. Barnes acknowledges the indeterminacy, on her account, about which social group should count as the disability rights movement and which rules should be taken as authoritative. Barnes does not regard this as a drawback of her view; she claims that it is exactly what we should expect for a social category as messy as disability (pp. 48-50).

Barnes’ contributions in this part are several and significant. She extends the productive and now burgeoning discussions in social ontology to disability, and with it brings a new set of analytical tools to think about disability. The novelty of her account has rejuvenated discussions about the nature of disability, which may sometimes come across as merely minor variations of the two prominent views. Her references to the DRM in her account of disability highlight the important but sometimes neglected connection between disability and social movements.

Nonetheless, I have some concerns. First, Barnes does not really engage with other views that also occupy the middle ground between the simple naturalistic and social constructionist accounts of disability – especially the family of views known as the ‘interactionist model’, according to which disability is (or arises as a result of) the interaction between disabled bodies and their environments. These complex views are not obviously susceptible to the arguments that Barnes marshals against the simpler accounts she discusses. Devoting more space to discussing these views – and, more generally, engaging more extensively with other disability studies scholars – would have been welcome. Successfully tackling them would moreover bolster Barnes’ own account, though perhaps at the slight cost of bogging down the pace of the discussions.

Second, what happens if the DRM is systematically biased (though not completely mistaken) in their judgements about the kinds of conditions that they promote justice for? If so, the rules undergirding those judgements may themselves be systematically biased. This possibility is not far-fetched once we acknowledge, as Barnes does, that the

dominant narratives and the organisation of common institutions within a society may obscure various aspects of individuals' own experiences of disability (pp. 168-173). The relatively narrow civil rights arguments employed by the DRM at its earliest stages – which, borrowing from other civil rights struggles along gender, racial and religious lines, centred on independent living and integration into the broader community – and the accompanying exclusion of certain conditions from the movement, may constitute further evidence for this possibility. The worry is that in these circumstances, we simply have to go along with the DRM about what disability is. Neither the usual factors for evaluating explanatory adequacy (p. 41), nor Barnes' brief claims that the DRM can deploy its own rules incorrectly or be ignorant about whether something is a disability (pp. 46-47), appear to fully address this worry. A deeper worry is that we may not, on Barnes' account, even be able to make such evaluations of bias at all. More clarity is needed about how we arrive at the rules, and the standards against which we may appropriately evaluate them. Otherwise, we gain little purchase on Barnes' claim that the members of the DRM are not inviolable disability determiners. Resolving this issue may require Barnes to incorporate insights from critical social theory, especially those concerning how individuals and groups may succeed in escaping the grips of ideology, and the difficulties they face in doing so. This would be a welcome connection between the discussions in social ontology and social philosophy.

Third, Haslanger's ameliorative inquiry into the social category of woman delivers the claim that to be a woman is to be socially subordinated along some dimension on the basis of presumed female sex. Social subordination is unjust. Being presumed to be of female sex may in some cases – especially for trans people – be unjust. By incorporating social subordination and presumption into the concept of 'woman', Haslanger draws our attention to the oft-hidden roles they play in demarcating the boundaries of 'woman'. This reveals potential ways of resisting or eliminating these injustices in our progressive social and political projects. In providing her ameliorative account of disability, however, Barnes does not incorporate the often pernicious and distorting roles played by the medical and caregiving communities in determining the boundaries of 'disability'. Here, the worry is that in leaving these communities and their actions out of her account of disability, Barnes' account potentially obscures sites of progressive resistance and thus may be less ameliorative than it first appears.

### **Mere-difference**

The second part is the core of Barnes' book, and includes Chapters 2 ('Bad-Difference and Mere-Difference'), 3 ('The Value-Neutral Model'), 4 ('Taking Their Word for It') and 5 ('Causing Disability').

In Chapter 2, Barnes provides an extensive characterisation of the distinction between what she terms 'bad-difference' and 'mere-difference' views of disability. The former are views that in various ways assert that there is an intrinsic or counterfactually stable connection between disability and lower well-being (pp. 59-69). Here, Barnes' contribution consists in laying out the core commitments of bad-difference views – views that, because of their being regarded as common-sensical, are often taken for granted as true within much philosophical discourse. Barnes argues that these commitments are not

as easy to support as is generally assumed, and rejects them in turn. The mere-difference view is born partly of these rejections. It rejects the commitments of bad-difference views, in addition to claims that disabilities by themselves or intrinsically make individuals better off (p. 69). According to the mere-difference view, disability is simply a different way of being a minority, rather than one that necessarily makes individuals better or worse off.

Barnes' full defence of the mere-difference view spans the three following chapters. In Chapter 3, Barnes develops the 'Value-Neutral Model' of disability, which she takes to be a member of the family of mere-difference views. According to the Value-Neutral Model, disability is a neutral feature. Depending on what other factors it is combined with or accompanied by, it can be good or bad for an individual. Unlike other variants of mere-difference views (such as the social model), the Value-Neutral Model does not need to deny claims that disability can sometimes be bad or that it can be bad even in a world without ableism. What the Value-Neutral Model shows is that disability can be in some sense bad for individuals, yet be neutral with respect to their well-being in virtue of the disability specifically (p. 88).

This claim is supported by three sets of claims. First, something can be locally or globally good or bad for someone, where good or bad for are understood as positive or negative effects on her well-being. The effects of a local good or bad are restricted – either with respect to some feature of an individual's life, or to a period of time. The effects of a global good or bad are not similarly restricted. The distinction makes clear that a local good or bad need not be a global good or bad (pp. 80-81). Whether something is a global good or bad depends on how its local goods or bads interact. For instance, a child's flu is a global bad because the local bads of feeling miserable outweigh the local good of skipping school (p. 82). Second, something can be good, bad or neutral simpliciter with respect to someone's well-being. Something that is bad simpliciter always makes a negative contribution to someone's well-being; her life goes worse in virtue of it specifically. The converse holds for things that are good simpliciter. Barnes suggests that many things are neutral simpliciter with respect to well-being – their presence do not, on their own, have any impact on someone's well-being. Whether something is good, bad or neutral simpliciter with respect to someone's well-being is distinct from the issue of whether it is good or bad for her. To assess the latter, we would have to see what that thing is combined with. For instance, something that is bad simpliciter – like getting cancer or going through a bad divorce – could be good for someone if it causes a series of changes that eventually increase well-being. Third, something can be good or bad for someone instrumentally or non-instrumentally. Barnes gives the example of someone who gets cancer, and who describes her getting cancer as a good thing. Barnes observes that this person is not valuing cancer for *its own sake*; instead, she values it for the goods that are brought about by it (pp. 82-84).

Partly relying on a range of first-personal reflections, Barnes argues that the testimony of disabled people about their lives as disabled people gives us good reason to support the Value-Neutral Model. She draws analogies between being disabled and possessing other minority traits – such as being gay – and in doing so shifts the burden of proof on to those

who claim that disability is unlike such traits (pp. 88-98). Barnes notes, however, that the Value-Neutral Model applies to disability *per se*, rather than to *specific* disabilities. It is compatible with the Value-Neutral Model that some specific disabilities are bad simpliciter or even bad-differences. Barnes argues, however, that we should be very cautious about saying this of any particular disability. First, our judgements about the impact of disability on well-being in a world without ableism are fragile at best. Second, empirical studies suggest that the badness (or otherwise) of disability does not track what typical non-disabled people expect it to track. Third, the testimony of disabled people with a wide variety of disabilities about valuing their disabilities – including what people might consider to be the most ‘severe’ disabilities – suggest that most disabilities are neutral simpliciter and mere-differences (pp. 101-103). Barnes concludes her discussion of the Value-Neutral Model by arguing that it is compatible with most mainstream contemporary views of well-being (pp. 107-118).

In Chapter 4, Barnes defends her account against the objection that disabled people’s testimony about their lives are unreliable or systematically mistaken because they involve adaptive preferences. Here, Barnes centres her discussions on the account of adaptive preferences given by Amartya Sen and Martha Nussbaum. On that account, disabled people change their preferences in response to the diminished options that they have access to, given their disability. This change is problematic insofar as it leads to preferences for something that one should not, *ceteris paribus*, prefer (pp. 126-127). If so, we may not take the word of disabled people at face value – removing one source of support for the Value-Neutral Model. Barnes argues that this account problematically overgeneralises – for instance, it would include the claims of males who value being male as due to adaptive preferences, insofar as being male is associated with some severe and permanent constraints on a person’s options, relative to females (p. 131). The only way to avoid overgeneralisation is to stipulate that being male (or having any trait) is not suboptimal – that the associated constraints are not bad. Yet, in the case of disability, that is exactly the question under dispute. The stipulation would be unwarranted (p. 133). The adaptive model, Barnes suggests, gives people an easy way to discount the testimony of disabled people, in cases where certain prejudices about disabled people are operative. Drawing from Miranda Fricker’s work, Barnes argues that this is a kind of testimonial injustice (pp. 135-139).

In Chapter 5, Barnes defends her account against the objection that if the mere-difference view is true, it would be permissible to cause disability (and impermissible to remove disability). Since this result appears implausible, the objection goes, the mere-difference view is mistaken. Barnes rejects the claim that there is a general connection between the mere-difference view and the permissibility of causing disability. Even if disability were a mere-difference or neutral simpliciter with respect to well-being, we may nonetheless have various reasons to *not* cause disability. In many cases, there would be significant transition costs – the process of *becoming* disabled is a difficult one, and we have reason to avoid imposing these costs against people’s wills (p. 148). Even in the absence of transition costs – such as cases involving fetuses – we may still reject causing disability on the basis of non-interference principles that prohibit meddling with identity-determining traits. Such principles are not specific to causing disability – they also apply

to cases where people try to make foetuses female or male, gay or straight, and so on (pp. 148-150). Barnes suggests that a defender of the mere-difference view can also appeal to the potential degree of risk to the well-being of the disabled person whose disability we are causing, *given the way the world is now*. However, Barnes sets this option aside for a resolute response. She argues that the potential risk associated with disability is not high enough to warrant interfering with the development of a child who would be disabled, in order to make them non-disabled (p. 154). The counter-intuitiveness of this position is to be expected, given that much of our reasoning about disability is clouded by confused assumptions about and poor understandings of the lives of disabled people (pp. 155-156). The mere-difference view thus does not licence the permissibility of causing disability (or the impermissibility of removing disability).

In this part of her book, Barnes' target is not some well-defined philosophical position on disability. Instead, it is a set of inter-related claims about disability that are regarded as so common-sensical in philosophical and ordinary discourse that they are hardly ever defended. Barnes' first – and, to me, most significant – contribution lies in articulating what those claims exactly are, and how they shape our discourse about and attitudes towards disability in many different domains. This is refreshing; it is not often that we see philosophers begin their work by organising and systematising – that is, by taking seriously – the inchoate and inarticulate claims that undergird the claims that we make and the practices we engage in, rather than presenting and tackling their caricatures. Barnes' second important contribution is, of course, her substantive views about how those claims are to be rejected or qualified.

I have some concerns about Barnes' arguments in this part. First, while the distinction between local and global goods and bads is clear enough in the abstract, Barnes does not elaborate on how we are to arrive at judgements about whether something is a global good. From her brief remarks, something is a global good if (and perhaps also only if) the local goods outweigh the local bads. Two sets of questions are salient. One concerns which goods and bads associated with disability we should take into account. For instance, do the very "indirect" effects of being disabled in an ableist society count? To answer this question, we need to know how we should treat 'knock-on' effects associated with disability, and whether we can account for them in a principled way. If there are no principled responses, we need to know which pragmatic considerations we can justifiably employ to guide us. The other set of questions concerns how we are to engage in such 'weighing'. Barnes' two examples – that her sister's running is a global good, whereas a student's flu is a global bad – do not shed much light on how the weighing is to be done. Additionally, the examples appear to be misplaced. Barnes' argument for the Value-Neutral Model concerns disability *per se*, rather than specific disabilities. Yet the examples are specific instances of "exercise" and "illness" respectively (following Barnes, it seems that we have reason to avoid "fine-graining" the relevant categories, to "running" and "flu"). It is unclear what we are to make of these examples. Given the importance of the distinction between local and global goods to Barnes' account, more elaboration would be welcome.

My second concern centres on Barnes' reasons for wanting the Value-Neutral Model of disability to be compatible with most mainstream views of well-being. Barnes does not defend this move. Presumably, the Value-Neutral Model gains some plausibility upon such compatibility. However, I wonder how much purchase this in-principle compatibility has, especially since the different accounts of well-being are presented at a high level of generality. What should we say to claims that the Value-Neutral Model is incompatible with *this* or *that* specific account of well-being, and where these accounts rely on slightly different principles or commitments from those general accounts that Barnes discusses? Moreover, might there not be reasons to opt for and defend a conception of well-being that *best* supports the claim of the DRM? The questions of what these reasons might be, and how to weigh them against those supporting the move to make the Value-Neutral Model compatible with most mainstream views of well-being, are left unaddressed.

Third, and more generally, I wondered if there are many conditions – beyond obvious cases such as those involving unremitting torture or suffering – that would fall outside the scope of the Value-Neutral Model or mere-difference view more generally. The claim that a condition's overall goodness or badness depends on what it is combined with appears applicable to most conditions. Is one consequence of Barnes' account that it hollows out the set of things that are *not* neutral simpliciter with respect to well-being? If so, the Value-Neutral Model and mere-difference view may have far greater revisionary potential than Barnes explicitly acknowledges. Perhaps Barnes would welcome this result – we may very well be systematically mistaken about the connections between many conditions and overall well-being. But if so, more should be said in defence of this revisionary view, including whether these implications impugn the plausibility of the Value-Neutral Model or mere-difference view.

Fourth, how might we proceed to think about disability, given that as a category it is neutral simpliciter with respect to well-being? Do we set aside talk of disability that occurs at this high level of generality, and instead “fine-grain” our discussions – focusing on the effects of *this* or *that* disability's effect on well-being? This leads to an interesting result – Barnes' arguments in this part of the book might then be akin to a ladder that we *throw away* after we have used it as part of our climb to a place where we can see clearly, and from where our next journey begins. Again, perhaps Barnes would welcome this result; it would be interesting to hear what she has to say about the journey forward.

### **Pride**

The final part of the book centres on Chapter 6 ('Disability Pride'), but also includes Chapter 4 ('Taking Their Word for It'). Barnes argues that disability pride – the politically motivated celebration of difference – is a crucial part of undermining the idea that disability is somehow essentially or inherently tragic. Drawing again from Miranda Fricker's work, Barnes argues that disability pride allows disabled people to make sense of their own experiences in their own terms, rather than simply adopt the prejudiced dominant assumptions about disability as lack, loss or tragedy. In this respect, disability pride counteracts hermeneutical injustice – an epistemic injustice that involves obscuring

aspects of people's experiences. The benefits of pride are not just emotive, but also epistemic (p. 183).

On this issue – and perhaps this is a matter of differing interests – I would have liked to see more discussions of the history and politics of pride, and their connection to the earlier parts of the book. Why did early disability activists frame their activism in the language of civil rights? Did they do so justifiably? Is their deployment of such language fully inclusive of all disabled people, or might it *also* constitute a part of the dominant schema about whose lives are worthy of pride, and whose lives are not? From what vantage point might such assessments be made and defended? Our answers to these issues will have implications for who is disabled (Part 1) and whether disability is indeed neutral with respect to overall well-being (Part 2).

Summing up – as the reader would have noticed, my critical remarks primarily ask for more. This is indicative of what I take to be a key merit of Barnes' book beyond its significant substantive contributions – it invites the reader to imagine new possibilities of understanding disability which build upon or continue from the arguments presented (or at least revisions of them), rather than simply fall back on tired exchanges of counterexamples or fruitless battles of intuition. Barnes recounts, in the Preface, that as a student she was disappointed by much of the analytic philosophical work on disability. With this book, Barnes has helped future generations of students be less disappointed.\*

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### References

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