

# Disability as solidarity: political not (only) metaphysical

Tom Dougherty

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

**Correspondence:** Tom Dougherty, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Email: tomjds3@gmail.com

What is disability? What do we want it to be? In slogan form, these questions characterise an “ameliorative” project for disability (Haslanger 2000, 2012). Elizabeth Barnes pioneers such a project in *The Minority Body*, arguing that we should affirm disability as a social category, because it is one that “people have found useful when organising themselves in a civil rights struggle” (Barnes 2016, p.41). This motivates her innovative social constructionist account of disability as solidarity:<sup>1</sup> “disability *just is* whatever the disability rights movement is promoting justice for.” (Barnes 2016, p.43).

But why should we adopt the category of disability in our theories just because the category is useful for activists? I will explore two answers. The first is that we ought to have the same explanatory aims as activists. The second is that we ought to join activists in disrupting ableist ideologies. The latter answer could motivate a nearby account of disability to Barnes’s, according to which disability just is whatever the disability pride movement is celebrating as valuable.

## 1 | DISABILITY AS SOLIDARITY

Barnes defines disability in terms of the disability rights movement’s rules for making judgments about solidarity:

*A person, S, is disabled in a context, C, iff:*

- (i) S is in some bodily state x
- (ii) The rules for making judgements about solidarity employed by the disability rights movement classify x in context C as among the physical conditions that they are seeking to promote justice for. (Barnes 2016, p.46)

Barnes leaves open what these rules are, but speculates that they consider you disabled if you have sufficiently many of a cluster of features. Candidates include

\*Thanks to Katharine Jenkins for helpful comments.

<sup>1</sup>For discussion of solidarity in the context of black solidarity, see (Shelby 2002, pp.237-239).

*being subject to social stigma and prejudice; being viewed as unusual or atypical; making ordinary daily tasks difficult or complicated; causing chronic pain; causing barriers to access of public spaces; causing barriers to employment; causing shame; requiring use of mobility aids or assistive technology; requiring medical care; and so on (Barnes 2016, p.45).*

Features like these define with whom the disability rights movement is in solidarity when it pushes for change.

Barnes offers several arguments in favour of this account. One is that the account gets right the extension of disabled people; another is that it explains why they are unified as a social category. In addition, Barnes motivates disability as solidarity on the basis of her interpretation of Sally Haslanger's (2000, 2012) "ameliorative" project for concepts that pick out social kinds. Haslanger asks,

*What is the point of having these concepts? What cognitive or practical task do they (or should they) enable us to accomplish? Are they effective tools to accomplish our (legitimate) purposes; if not, what concepts would serve these purposes better? (Haslanger 2000, p. 33)*

With these purposes in mind, our question of which concepts to adopt "is primarily a pragmatic and sometimes a political one" (Haslanger 2000, p.34; see also Jenkins 2016, p.395). Barnes characterises her project for disability as ameliorative insofar as it explains why we should not prefer an error theory, according to which there is no such thing as disability (Barnes 2016, p.40). By seeking an explanation of the category's usefulness, Barnes presents her ameliorative project as extending the principle that we should choose the theory that provides the "best overall explanatory picture" (Barnes 2016, p.41). This desideratum of explanatory adequacy sits alongside three other desiderata: that an account correctly classifies paradigm cases of disabled and non-disabled people; that it avoids circularity; and that it avoids pre-judging normative issues, e.g. by stipulating that disability is bad.

We will return to the normative desideratum, but first let us see Barnes's case for not adopting an error theory of disability. Barnes's answer is that disability is a "social category people have found useful when organising themselves in a civil rights struggle" (Barnes 2016, p.41). Note, though, that this answer focuses on what *activists* have found useful. However, an ameliorative project is one engaged in by *theorists*. So why does the fact that the category is useful to activists give theorists reason to adopt the category?

## 2 | EXPLANATORY AMELIORATION

I will consider two ways to build a bridge between activism and theory. Call the first approach, "explanatory amelioration." On this approach, we would explain why we should affirm the category of disability on the grounds that the category helps us offer other explanations. Thus, we would be invoking the notion of explanation twice-over:

*Explanatory Work Schema. The explanation of why it is useful to include category-X in our theory is that category-X allows us to give better explanations-of-Y.*

A metaphysician would be following this schema when positing the category of Lewisian natural properties on the grounds that the category allows us to give better explanations of objective similarity. Similarly, a metaphysician would invoke this schema in explaining why the category of electrons is useful by showing how it facilitates physical explanations of attraction and repulsion.

So what would be the relevant “explanations-of-Y”? Barnes states that

*[w]hen evaluating theories of social categories, the ameliorative project asks us to consider what role these categories have to play in social progress—with the background assumption that understanding and explaining social injustice is part of what will help us to address it (Barnes 2016, p.41).*

Understanding social injustice and social progress are important theoretical goals. But what are we better able to explain when we adopt the category of disability?

We might look for this answer in the fact that disability is “a social category people have used to group themselves to work for progress and change.” (Barnes 2016, p.42) This might suggest we should adopt the category of disability on the grounds that we have to attribute the concept of disability to activists in order to explain how and why they have brought about change. But I think it is uncharitable to read Barnes in this way, since this rationale is not persuasive. In general, we do not need to adopt a concept ourselves simply because we need to attribute the concept to members of a social movement to explain their behaviour. Perhaps, in explaining the behaviour of a White supremacist movement, we need to attribute to its members the concept of the Aryan race. Even so, when forming our own views, we should adopt an error theory of the Aryan race, and view the category as a myth.

It seems to me more charitable to read Barnes as offering a different reason to adopt the category of disability—it allows us to explain injustice. In particular, the category allows us to demarcate a particular type of injustice experienced by disabled people:

*[disability is] a social category that people have used to explain what their experiences of social oppression have in common. (Barnes 2016, pp.41-42)*

This suggests that theorists should share activists’ goal of explaining the similarities between the experiences of persons with conditions such as deafness, achondroplasia, and multiple sclerosis. For example, frequently, these people experience stigmatisation, do not have their conditions accommodated and inhabit a social world that lacks universally available conceptions of disability that ring true to their own experiences of disability (Barnes 2016, p.172, drawing on Fricker 2007).

Thus, the category of disability allows us to state a target for our explanatory inquiry. This inquiry will have an underlying pragmatic rationale once we add Barnes’s assumption that understanding injustice allows us to better combat it (Barnes 2016, p.41). In this way, our political goals shape what we aim to explain in our theories.

### 3 | IDEOLOGICAL AMELIORATION

But once we allow political considerations to set our explanatory agenda, why stop there? Why not allow politics other roles in shaping our theories?

Following this approach, we might seek an account of disability that constitutes “ideological amelioration”—it amounts to a more just way of thinking about disability. Let us use the term “ideology” in a non-pejorative sense to refer to conscious and unconscious ways of thinking about the social world, which are embodied in practice and hence constitute a form of social life (Haslanger 2012, p.18, pp.412-413).<sup>2</sup> We can then say that ableist oppression is partly constituted by an ableist ideology.

<sup>2</sup>These could instead be described as “forms of social consciousness” if we prefer to reserve “ideology” for a critical purpose (Shelby 2003; see also Geuss 1981).

This ideology would include conceiving of disability as a misfortune, stigmatising disability, and thinking of paradigmatic persons as non-disabled.

Part of resisting unjust ideologies involves replacing them with alternatives.<sup>3</sup> One alternative ideology would be framed around an error theory of disability; this ideology has no room for the category in shaping our thoughts and practices. But another alternative ideology would be framed around the disability rights movement's conception of disability. One way to choose between these ideologies would be to determine which would best promote valuable social change. This question is partly empirical and its answer might vary for different societies in light of their specific histories. Still, the disability rights movement's success in our society underscores the ameliorative virtues of its ideology for us.

This suggests a way of bridging activism and theory—both are ways of spreading ideologies. In everyday life, endorsing and spreading an ableist ideology amounts to engaging in social oppression. The same could be true of an academic theory that stigmatises disability.<sup>4</sup> This point also holds of ameliorative ideologies. In everyday life, promoting the disability rights movement's conception of disability amounts to promoting ideological change. The same is true, I suggest, when Barnes defends her theoretical account of disability as solidarity. In light of this, we can see why the utility of a category for activists could provide a reason for theorists to adopt the category themselves. Theorists should do so because they should promote the same ameliorative ideology that is promoted by activists. In this way, our view of disability would directly respond to what we want disability to be.

We could see this proposal as uniting theorists and activists as separate branches of a progressive social movement. But I prefer to see the proposal as blurring the distinction between activism and theory. This distinction is blurred in one direction insofar as theorists must carry out their theorising with political goals. Creating theories of disability that feature in research and education is one of the many ways of attempting ideological change, alongside e.g. writing autobiographies of disability or organising disability pride events. Of course, any individual academic has a limited ability to change the social world, but the same is true of individuals engaged in other forms of activism.

But the distinction between activism and theory can be blurred in the other direction as well. We can see (non-academic) activists as themselves developing a philosophy of disability, insofar as they are collectively devising informal criteria that define a social category, with which they conceptualise and navigate the social world. Why not see this ideology as an informal philosophical theory of disability? On this proposal, we should think of academics as using the methods and outlets distinctive of academia to engage in the same fundamental enterprise that non-academics engage in by other means. This would be to see the philosophy in the faculty office as continuous with the philosophy in the street.

## 4 | SOLIDARITY WITH DISABILITY PRIDE

But what exactly is the ideology of the disability rights movement? Barnes notes that this has been in flux, as the movement's goals have evolved:

<sup>3</sup>For discussion of ideological critique, see (Shelby 2003; Haslanger 2012, pp.406-428).

<sup>4</sup>For this reason, political considerations should feature prominently in philosophers' decision of how to conceive of a social identity like disability. This point is overlooked by Guy Kahane and Julian Savulescu (2009), who claim that the key normative issue for disability is the ethical issue of well-being. Consequently, they claim that "it is not especially important whether the concept we define should be labelled 'disability' or something else." In doing so, they overlook the way that our labels, and the conceptions they pick out, function in ideologies that constitute the social world. As such, e.g. stigmatising definitions of the term "disability" could reinforce an ableist ideology in the same way that stigmatising definitions of the term "homosexual" could reinforce a homophobic ideology.

*A striking feature of the disability rights movement over the last twenty years has been an evolution from simply demanding equality to actively celebrating disability. The movement now includes not just protests and demands for legislation, but disability pride parades, disability-centric art and theatre, and an emphasis on shared community. Disability culture is an increasingly vivid part of the disability rights movement. (Barnes 2016, p.42)*

Consequently, there is an emerging “affirmational” conception of disability within the movement (Barnes 2016, p.42). On this conception, conditions like deafness, achondroplasia, and multiple sclerosis are celebrated as different valuable ways of being human, alongside being non-disabled. We can think of the affirmational conception as contributing to the “collective negotiation of our social identities” (Haslanger 2000, p.48) and developing a social identity of disability into an “emancipatory” form (Jenkins 2016, pp.412-413). In other words, the disability pride movement is articulating a socially progressive ideology of disability with explicit evaluative commitments.<sup>5</sup>

Suppose a wholesale adoption of an affirmational ideology would be the most effective way of bringing about a more just world. Then, as theorists engaged in ideological amelioration, we would have reason to adopt the same affirmational conception of disability ourselves. Inspired by the overall shape of Barnes’s account, we could propose that disability just is whatever the disability pride movement is celebrating, and hold that someone is disabled in a context when she is in a bodily state classified in this context by the disability pride movement as one of the states that it is celebrating.<sup>6</sup> So while a narrowly “disability rights” account of disability as solidarity would view disability as a site for social change, the “disability pride” analogue would view it as a valuable social identity.

But how does this fit with *The Minority Body*? While Barnes is clearly enthusiastic about disability pride, she does not commit to its affirmational conception of disability. Instead, she argues only that her own account has the virtue of leaving room for this conception (Barnes 2016, p.52). Moreover, one of Barnes’s desiderata for an account of disability is that it should

*“not make stipulations about normative issues. It should not be built into the very definition of disability that disability is something that’s bad or suboptimal.” (Barnes 2016, p.12)*

This desideratum is in at least *prima facie* tension with conceiving of disability as whatever the disability pride movement is celebrating.<sup>7</sup> Insofar as we want to adopt an affirmational definition of disability as a valuable condition,<sup>8</sup> we would be engaging in “critical projects” that “explicitly embrace normative results” and hence fail to meet Barnes’s desideratum (Haslanger 2000, p.38).

Still, an affirmational account of disability could retain the spirit of Barnes’s desideratum while changing its letter. Barnes’s reason for avoiding a normatively-loaded account of disability “is simply that any such account risks being unable to” correctly categorise paradigmatic disabilities as

<sup>5</sup>I cannot discuss adequately here the cultural issues in play. For an argument that antiracist black solidarity need not require a black cultural identity, see (Shelby 2002).

<sup>6</sup>Instead of defining disability in terms of the disability pride movement, we might point to the movement, and deferentially say that our definition is whatever definition that movement holds.

<sup>7</sup>Katharine Jenkins has pointed out to me that this conception does not necessitate making a direct normative commitment: one might adopt this conception simply because one sees celebration as the most effective way of reversing stigmatisation.

<sup>8</sup>This type of definition would aim to do more than specify the extension of the category of disability; it would also specify the appropriate evaluative attitudes that we ought to adopt.

disabilities (Barnes 2016, p.12). Consequently, we could qualify the desideratum so that it excludes only accounts with normative commitments that lead to extensional errors. An affirmational account of disability could pass this test. In addition, we could read Barnes's desideratum as ruling out only normative *stipulations* about disability, but not normative commitments that are defended on independent grounds. Here it is relevant that in *The Minority Body* and elsewhere, Barnes has defended the thesis that disability is not bad in itself (Barnes 2014, 2016). Since this defense does not rely on a conception of disability, it could fortify a normatively-loaded conception of disability.

## 5 | CONCLUSION

Barnes defends disability as solidarity partly on the grounds that it explains why disability is a useful social category. There are at least two plausible ways of making this case. The category of disability could be useful for us when explaining the common features of disabled people's experiences. It could also be useful in trying to change our society's dominant ideology of disability. The latter approach suggests taking seriously the disability pride movement's affirmational conception of disability. This involves normative commitments, but these are benign and defensible. Either way, we would allow political considerations to influence what we do in philosophy and hence potentially create a parallel with science: if we think of social science as a value-laden enterprise, then we should think the same of our metaphysics of the social.

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