

*The Minority Body: A Theory of Disability*, by Elizabeth Barnes. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016, xii + 200 pp.

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“It’s easy to confuse the view from normal with the view from nowhere.

And then it’s uniquely the minority voices which we single out as biased or lacking objectivity.”

(*The Minority Body*, ix)

*The Minority Body* starts with a powerful, almost defiant acknowledgment: “This book is personal. ... I’m disabled, and this is a book about disability. Of course it’s personal.” (p. ix)

Far from admitting a limitation, Elizabeth Barnes is in fact vindicating the epistemic legitimacy of her subjective standpoint. Even though the charge of partiality is generally only leveled against disabled people, disability is a personal issue for everyone, disabled or not: “The last time I checked, most non-disabled people are pretty personally invested in being non-disabled” (p. ix).

But the crucial meta-philosophical point that Barnes makes in this excellent book is not only that disability in particular is personal for everyone, but also that the view from normal is *never* the view from nowhere. Barnes evidently applies to disability three lessons of feminist epistemology (whose influence she explicitly acknowledges): first, that value-neutral inquiry is an impossible ideal; second, that value-neutral inquiry may be a dangerous ideological myth when what purports to be the impartial, objective, comprehensive perspective is in fact the perspective of the dominant group; third, that the non-neutral, partial, subjective view may turn out to be epistemically privileged, the *only one* from which it

is possible to discover important truths. The central thesis of the book, that “[t]o be disabled is to have a minority body, but not to have a broken or defective body” (p. 6), could have emerged only from a specific *somewhere*—the embodied experience of the disabled body.<sup>1</sup>

In this respect, *The Minority Body* exemplifies a general trend in academic philosophy: increasing appreciation and respect for topics and methods typical of fields such as philosophy of gender and race, applied philosophy, philosophical psychology, which for a long time had been deemed too messy, too applied, too narrow, and had been relegated, together with their practitioners, to the muddy outskirts of the one true ivory Kallipolis.

Barnes’ recounting of her personal experience, not just with disability but with being a disabled philosopher, is telling: she confesses that she did not dare to write about disability until a more senior and more established philosopher, Sally Haslanger, showed her that “it’s possible to do excellent philosophy on topics in which you’re personally invested” (p. x). What Barnes does not explicitly say is that Haslanger too started her philosophical career by doing straightforward analytic metaphysics. And many other established analytic philosophers have been “coming out” as personally invested in “messy” and “peripheral” subfields.

*The Minority Body*, however, does not just *exemplify a trend*, but is a truly *exemplary incarnation* of it: it is a superb accomplishment, both in form and content. First of all, it is very enjoyable to read, which is no small feat when it comes to academic philosophy. I was as sad to end it as if I had been reading a thrilling novel. Barnes manages to write with lightness and humor (her jokes are actually funny), while maintaining rigor, precision and clarity in the reasoning.

The book is nicely structured as well. After a few introductory remarks that mostly justify the limited scope of the book to *physical* disability, the book features a philosophical

tour de force that metaphysicians in particular will enjoy. The goal of this first chapter is to figure out “*what it is* for something to be a disability” (p. 10). Barnes lists four desiderata—correct categorization of paradigmatic cases; absence of normative stipulations; explanatoriness; noncircularity—and shows how several alternative accounts fail to satisfy them. The accounts she considers are either naturalistic or social constructionist ones, and Barnes does an excellent job at highlighting the theoretical appeal of both approaches. Her own view, analogous to Charles Mills’ view of race, is a *moderate social constructionist* one, which “says that disability is socially constructed, but which places greater importance on objective features of bodies” (p. 38). That is, there are some objective physical features that determine whether or not one counts as disabled, but the fact that these features matter to us is dependent on social factors, not on some objective similarity between them. More specifically, and inspired by Sally Haslanger’s “ameliorative project”, according to which what some social kinds are depends at least in part on the social role we want them to play, Barnes claims that disability is a category that “people have found useful when organizing themselves in a civil rights struggle” (p. 41), and that “disability *just is* whatever the disability rights movement is promoting justice for” (p. 43). In other words, disability is a relatively new social category that was created by disability rights activists. People with different bodies end up participating in a common social pursuit—fighting for their rights—and sharing experiences, goals, emotions, and struggles. Importantly, “[t]hose judgments of commonality are (implicitly) rule-based. The application of those rules determine what counts as a disability” (p. 46).

Coherently with this view, Barnes throughout the book quotes disability rights activists and appeals to the testimony of disabled authors. She defends this methodological feature in chapter four, where she argues against the view that the testimony of disabled

people is systematically dismissing it. In particular, she shows how disabled people's preference do not seem to qualify as irrational adaptive preferences, and she shows that disabled people are often victims of what Miranda Fricker has called *testimonial injustice*.

The remainder of the book explores the connection between disability and well-being. Her view is a species of what she calls the "Mere-Difference View", which she distinguishes from the "Bad-Difference View" in chapter two. Barnes takes pains in differentiating the mere-difference view from the social model of disability, according to which all "bad effects of disability are due *entirely* to social prejudice" (p. 58). While the social model is *a* version of the mere-difference view, it is not the only one. Barnes points out that mere-difference is compatible with the claim that disability by itself involves the loss of intrinsic goods. Disability is a neutral feature insofar as it can be good or bad for you, depending on the circumstances, and the person's preferences and goals. Barnes details some of the bad and good effects of disability in chapter three.

The last two chapters tackle slightly more specific issues. Chapter five responds to an objection to the mere-difference approach, according to which the view cannot justify the widespread intuition that causing a disability is impermissible. Barnes shows that her account can justify such an intuition in most cases, and that, in cases when it does not, that's because the intuition is rooted in ableist prejudice and should thus be discarded.

Finally, chapter six is devoted to articulating the notion of disability pride, that is, "the politically motivated celebration of difference" (p. 181). Barnes' original take on this much-debated topic is that the benefits of pride movements are not only emotional, but also *epistemic*: "pride movements also affect what we can *know*" (p. 183).<sup>ii</sup>

The book thus comes full circle: it started by highlighting how the silencing of disabled people affects the philosophical discussion of disability in epistemically pernicious

ways, and it ends by highlighting how disability pride is a radical remedy for our confused and ignorant thinking: “(d)isability pride says that we may have *minority* bodies, but we don’t have—we refuse to have—tragic bodies” (p. 186).

The plural first person in this conclusive sentence is particularly significant. While Barnes began her journey by talking about her own singular experience as a disabled philosopher, she ends it by embracing the collective standpoint of all disabled people, those who have a minority body (and in particular the perspective of those disabled people who are proud, rather than ashamed, of their minority bodies). It would appear, then, that Barnes’ inquiry adopts from start to finish an unapologetic personal perspective. Remember her initial claim that philosophers are all embodied, and so no philosopher can speak impartially and impersonally about disability.

But then we would expect Barnes to distance herself from the *majority* perspective, and to speak in terms of a “we” only to refer to people with disability. However, that is not what happens in most of the book. Barnes seamlessly moves from one kind of “we” to another: in certain crucial junctures, like the beginning and the end of the book, the “we” clearly refers to people with disability. But more often than not, the “we” refers to *all of us*. It refers to human beings, philosophers, scholars, or maybe those who picked up the book from a shelf because they thought the cover was cool (they were right).

The *we* refers to women and men, to people of color and Whites, to queer and straight people. Barnes often appeals to analogy: she asks us to think about the bodily limitations of men, who cannot bear children, or the stigma faced by gay people, or the discrimination against people of color. She also talks about short people who can’t reach tall shelves, or inflexible people with an impossible dream of becoming a ballet dancer.

The strategy of drawing an analogy between a certain identity or bodily feature and another, whose status is more controversial, is a common and effective one, but has some drawbacks: it may end up pitting one victimhood against another, and it may also be counterproductive with those who are less acquainted with first-personal experience of social injustice: they may be left with either a sterile sense of guilt, or the urge to fight the analogy at all costs: “Sure, gay people face social discrimination, but *this*, this is different!”

Barnes avoids both pitfalls: she talks about “our” prejudices, not the prejudices of the nondisabled, or the prejudices of the majority. She puts herself on the same side as her nondisabled readers, and invites all of us to reconsider our views in light of the testimony of disabled people. She reminds (able-bodied) women that they too were thought to be inherently defective, and invites them to look at the disabled body—her body, but it could be anybody’s body—with that in mind.

Of course, it is not just a matter of pronouns, but also a distinctive approach to arguments, marked by charity and intellectual humility. Barnes does not shy away from pointing out potential weakness of her views, or from admitting she is not sure about something. She does not battle straw men, but presents the opposing views at their strongest. There is no trace of the aggressiveness that characterizes much philosophy and that is often confused with rigor. These features augment not only the sharpness of the arguments, but also their persuasiveness: as a sympathetic, but skeptical reader, I found that she argued against all my objections convincingly and even *graciously*.

This graciousness is a striking feature once you remember that the author as a young student was expected to impartially and impersonally engage with arguments, such as those that can be found in the personal identity and the abortion literature, that simply *start* with the assumption that her life is not worth living. While I am very glad that she stuck around

in the philosophy profession and ended up writing such a ground-breaking book, I mourn the philosophical loss of those who couldn't. I hope they read *The Minority Body*, and feel vindicated. And I hope that nondisabled readers will find it as illuminating, humbling, and inspiring as I did.<sup>iii</sup>

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<sup>i</sup> For an overview of these issues, see Anderson, Elizabeth, "Feminist Epistemology and Philosophy of Science", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2015 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2015/entries/feminism-epistemology/>>.

<sup>ii</sup> The reader interested in a more detailed summary can find it (together with some valuable objections) in the excellent review by Stephen Campbell and Joseph Stramondo for *Notre Dame Philosophical Reviews*: <http://ndpr.nd.edu/news/71164-the-minority-body-a-theory-of-disability/>

<sup>iii</sup> Thank you to Elizabeth Barnes, Stephen Campbell, Tyler Doggett, and Shen-yi Liao for their helpful feedback on this review.