Review

The minority body: A theory of disability

Elizabeth Barnes

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At first glance, *The Minority Body* offers itself as an interesting addition to the existing literature on disability, promising to bring a rigorous philosophical perspective to an area that is beset by unsustainable social prejudices, biases and personal partialities. The remit of the book is to counter such incoherent thinking by stripping away the fluff and developing an analytic approach to the problematic that supports the view that to be physically disabled is simply to have a minority body. It will hardly come as an enlightening surprise to disability theorists of any school that embodied differences are not in themselves logically open to judgments of greater or lesser value, but what Barnes seems to want to upend is one dominant view within philosophy, according to which to be disabled just is to be worse off. The book is clearly addressed to a particular philosophical audience for whom the adversarial tradition of close argument and counter-argument constitutes the production of knowledge without any great need to give material substance to the abstract ideas under discussion. I have to say right away that, coming from a very different philosophical field, I was not charmed by the analytic approach, but did try to engage with it on its own terms.

Elizabeth Barnes is a well-established professor of philosophy, who no doubt knows her primary audience well. The arguments that she makes to shape the view that disability should be perceived as value-neutral are painstakingly worked through, with intricate attention paid to disarming objections from supposedly sceptical interlocutors. The text is rich in ever-more complex and restricted definitions that serve to close the door on doubters by showing the illogicality of their (interlocutors') positions, with multitudinous footnotes to further establish the rightness of Barnes' own position. As I long ago moved away from such an approach, it is no surprise that I was unable to fault her argument – and it is certainly a commendable effort – but the outcome was so abstract that it was difficult to maintain any enthusiasm for what it all implied. Do people in philosophy departments still really think like this to the exclusion of other models, or is Barnes simply unaware that what she sees as the dominant style – albeit most

Anglo-American departments do ostensibly favour such an approach – has long been supplemented or displaced by very different modes of thought? I don't mean to say that the analytic approach is irrelevant but that its practitioners are surely open to alternative ways of thinking that cannot be either sustained or dismantled by the ultra-careful and limited perspective that she offers. At first I thought that Barnes might see some of her readers as policy makers beset by commonplace misunderstandings of, and prejudices about, disability, but as the book progressed it became difficult to imagine that anyone outside the circle of analytic philosophy would be happy to follow the intricate steps of each argument even as they effectively demolished misconceptions. How many readers, I wondered, would not be puzzled by 'iff', 'de re'. 'de dicto', ' ϕ ' and so on?

It is all the stranger in that Barnes identifies, though not with any great emphasis, as a feminist philosopher working in ethics and social philosophy. Disability studies has been a very rich area of development over the last two or three decades and has frequently been the place where feminist philosophers have made a considerable difference. Susan Wendell's book *The Rejected Body* (1997), for example, marks a real turning point for what can be done from within the discipline, and particularly for adopting a first-person input based on her own experiences. Barnes, too, makes the point in her Preface that she is a disabled woman, but that insight is in no way evident in the rest of the book. Analytic philosophy prizes objectivity and rigorous argumentation unsullied by anything personal, and I suspect it was not an easy choice for Barnes to offer that insight. Nonetheless, what falls out of sight in her dispassionate approach is any sense of the phenomenological dimensions of the lived experience of disabled people. Although she illustrates her texts with multiple examples of the propositions she wants to analyse, they rarely seem to catch the empirical and pragmatic realities of what living with disabilities entails. The chosen paradigms are so one-dimensional and text-book ready that it is difficult to imagine seeing them as anything beyond an exercise in argumentation. Barnes does keep reminding readers that the issues are complex, but what she seems to mean is that the step-by-step process of establishing an irrefutable position on disability requires intricate revisions, as opposed to acknowledging that lives – all lives – are highly messy, contradictory and resistant to static systems of knowledge. Towards the end of her text, and particularly in the chapter 'Disability Pride', she does engage with some disabled scholars and activists, and she finally adopts a generic 'we' to insist that minority bodies are not 'tragic' bodies (p. 186), but this comes only after a full chapter, 'Taking Their Word for It', that is devoted to establishing that the testimony of disabled people can be believed. Perhaps this *is* a necessary step in analytic philosophy – although why those with disabilities should be singled out for such an enquiry gets glossed over – but it reads as uncomfortably apologetic.

Is there, then, any theory of disability to be gleaned from the book as its title suggests? Barnes is undoubtedly sympathetic to the social model explanation,

though clear – and I strongly agree with her on this – that its limitations make it inadequate as an all-encompassing model. She firmly rejects the disability/impairment distinction and insists too that disability is not a natural kind (p. 23) marking some common feature of bodies. In a quasi-Foucauldian move (not something Barnes would acknowledge of course), she asserts that the disability rights movement generated the category of disability as a useful mode of organisation in the struggle for civil rights. It is, then, ‘the application of social features (judgments about solidarity) to objective features of bodies that creates disability’ (p. 47). This is certainly an innovative way of expressing the central problematic and might have some unexpected implications, but Barnes cannot let it rest. By the time she has finished further refining her argument, to take account of contextual contingencies and so on, the welcome gesture towards a socio-political status has been entirely lost. As she sets out, the remainder of the book is about whether the difference of disabled bodies constitutes ‘bad-difference’ or ‘mere-difference’. As she puts it: ‘I’m going to defend the view – common within the disability rights movement, but often dismissed as incredible by philosophers – that disability is *neutral* with respect to well-being’ (p. 54). This is hardly the stuff of passionate engagement, as Barnes herself recognises with her invitation to readers to skip a few sections, but I did, dutifully, keep reading. I’m assuming that the author understands the requirements of her specific disciplinary audiences well, but I did wish she would break out of the discursive constraints that they seem to impose.

In the end, the search for a theory seems doomed to failure. Barnes is well aware that the arguments she rehearses and the counter-arguments she demolishes all tend towards over-generalisation, despite the careful complexification. Part of the problem, I suspect, is her privileging of rationality, and the desire to establish pure moral reason even in the face of an acknowledgment that biases, prejudices and stereotypes insinuate themselves into every assertion (p. 137). She spends a lot of time discussing the status of adaptive preferences and their function in disability discourse before abandoning the quest for distinctive clarity in that particular category. What puzzles me is why Barnes doesn’t simply follow the lead of Harriet McBryde Johnson, whose infamous interchange with Peter Singer she quotes at some length (pp. 137–138), and declare the topic exhausted. *The Minority Body* is an extended, and sometimes impressive, exercise in argumentation but it is often inaccessible to the non-specialist reader, offers little new to those already engaged in disability theory, and tells us nothing about how to behave. I have a lot of sympathy for Barnes’ attempt to take on her supposedly intransigent academic peers on their own terms, and her goals are deliberately circumscribed. If, in the end, the analysis remains unconvincing to her analytic colleagues – precisely because of the biases, prejudices and stereotypes that constrain us all – then she will have achieved little. But perhaps her rigorous and unwavering approach will gain traction and change some minds. For my own part, however, I tend towards Audre

Lorde's maxim (1984) that the master's tools will never demolish the master's house, and I hope that Barnes will soon gravitate towards her more obvious allies.

References

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