

Mere Difference

Elizabeth Barnes, Ethics (2014)

MacDougall, PHIL 2203, Fall 2025

I. Mere Difference, Defined

- “bad difference” views: “disability is by itself something that makes you worse off.”
- mere difference view: having a disability makes you different, but doesn't (by itself) make you worse off. p. 89.

II. Objections to Mere Difference

- If mere difference is right, then it would be:
 - A. Permissible to cause disability
 - B. Wrong to remove or prevent disability

A. Permissible to cause disability

- If disability isn't bad, then it is permissible to cause it
- But it is not permissible to cause disability
- Therefore, disability is bad

B. Wrong to remove or prevent disability

- If disability isn't bad, then it would be wrong to remove or prevent disability
- But it isn't wrong to remove disability (in fact, it's probably good)
- Therefore, disability must be bad

III. Response to A: Causing disability is always wrong, but not because disability is bad

- Consent
- Transition Costs
- But what about babies, who cannot consent and need not bear transitions costs?

Causing disability is wrong even in babies

Disabled baby:

- Cara has a 6 month old baby, Daisy. Cara values disability and thinks that well-educated and adjusted disabled people help combat ableism. Cara decides it would be a good thing to implement a painless procedure on her daughter, Daisy, in order to make her permanently disabled. Daisy will not remember the procedure.

Baby genes:

- Cara has a 6 month old baby, Daisy. Cara values gayness and thinks that well-educated and well-adjusted gay people are important for combating homophobia. Cara decides it would be good to implement a painless genetic alteration procedure on her daughter, Daisy, to ensure that Daisy grows up to identify as gay.

Do YOU think Cara would be wrong to do the procedure in either of these cases? Why or why not?

We think Cara would be wrong in “Baby Genes”...

- ...not because there is something inherently wrong with gayness, but because it is wrong to interfere in “merely different” identity-constituting features of a child’s life.
- **Non-interference principle:** it is wrong to interfere in major aspects of a child’s identity, even if the child won’t remember the interference and the interference won’t make the child worse off.
- If “non-interference principle” is right, then this also explains why we think Cara would be wrong to make Daisy disabled.
 - It’s not because there is something bad about being disabled, it’s just bad to change a child’s identity in any significant way, as seen in non-interference principle
 - ★ [Note that this conclusion only holds for interference with existing babies/persons. It doesn’t entail, for example, that you couldn’t choose to have a disabled child *rather than* an abled child, assuming that they are different children.]

IV. Response to B: Concede that it is wrong to remove disability in some cases

- But accepting Non-Interference Principle (along with Mere Difference) entails that it would be *wrong* to remove or prevent disability in a baby
 - i.e., it confirms that the Mere Difference view must concede Objection B
- So, Barnes concedes that it would be wrong to remove or prevent disability, since disability is a “mere difference” and it is wrong to interfere in the development of merely different identity-constituting characteristics

V. Is this concession so bad?

- Consider **Reverse Baby Genes**:
 - Cara has a 6 month old baby, Daisy, who is genetically wired to grow up gay. Cara values Daisy's happiness, and thinks that Daisy will be happier in the long run if she grows up straight. Cara decides it would be good to implement a painless genetic alteration procedure on her daughter, Daisy, to ensure that Daisy grows up straight, rather than gay
- Would Cara be wrong to do this?
 - Barnes thinks we will agree it would be; roughly because it is wrong to interfere in a child's identity, *even if* it makes things easier for the child in a prejudiced society.
 - Society should change, rather than Daisy's identity, in order to better accommodate gay people.

Check your intuitions

P1	Interfering in a merely different identity-constituting characteristic is wrong
P2	Homosexuality is a merely different identity-constituting characteristic
C	Therefore, interfering with homosexuality is wrong

Reaching the opposite conclusion—that interfering with homosexuality is permissible—requires rejecting P2 and so suggests that homosexuality is a *bad* difference. This is “homophobic.”

P1	Interfering in a merely different identity-constituting characteristic is wrong
P2	Disability is a merely different identity-constituting characteristic
C	Therefore, interfering with disability is wrong

Reaching the opposite conclusion—that interfering with disability is permissible—requires rejecting P2 and so suggests that disability is a *bad* difference. This is “ableist.”

VI. Conclusions

- Disability is a “mere difference,” like other mere differences (race, sex, sexuality). It is not inherently worse than being abled.
- Nevertheless, it is always wrong to cause or create disability (except, perhaps, in the case of consenting adults)—but for reasons unrelated to disability being “bad” for the disabled.
- It is likewise also wrong to prevent or remove disability (except in the case of consenting adults), because it is wrong to interfere in identity-constituting characteristics
- Intuitions that it is permissible or even right to prevent or remove disability are ableist—they depend on the unsupportable view that disability is a bad difference—and so should be abandoned.