

THE MODES OF HUMAN FLOURISHING

The complicated thought of 2 Corinthians gives suffering a place in flourishing. That is, on Paul's thought in that Epistle, something about suffering, which seems to deprive a person of flourishing, actually enables or enhances the flourishing of the sufferer.

Although discussions of human flourishing are by now something of a cottage industry, for my purposes here a person's flourishing can be thought of as his thriving.⁴ So understood, the opposite of thriving is not being sick but rather something like being dysfunctional. The failure to thrive is a broad category that encompasses any kind of impairment or impediment⁵ to the proper functioning of some part of a person or even of the whole person himself.⁶ It may be that this usage is not the everyday meaning of the term 'thriving,' but it is one sense of the term; and it is helpful to have some term by which to refer to the phenomenon in question. At any rate, a flourishing human life is a life that is an excellent one for a human being, and 'thriving' is a reasonable way to refer to the excellent condition of something living.

⁴ I am trying to use terminology that does not in effect associate me in a misleading way with one or another side in the disputes over disabilities. In my view, the best current philosophical discussion of disability can be found in Elizabeth Barnes's book *The Minority Body*; and her general view of disability as what she calls 'mere difference' rather than 'bad difference' seems to me entirely right. Her own care to disambiguate her position from other similar-sounding views in the near neighborhood has persuaded me to try expressing my position here with terminology not in regular use in the disability literature as she engages with it. In addition, I am using the terminology of 'flourishing' and 'well-being' in ways that are somewhat out of line with their use in the contemporary literature on well-being and happiness. Because I want terms that correlate with the account of suffering I have given and the connection between suffering and union with God at issue for my interpretation of the doctrine of the atonement, I will use the relevant terms in the way explained here, even if they have somewhat different uses in other areas of philosophy.

⁵ When the proper functioning of some organ or activity within a system is diminished or prevented by something else within that system, then there is an impediment to the organ or activity in question. When the proper functioning is diminished or prevented by the something internal to the organ or activity, then there is an impairment. I mean 'impediment' and 'impairment' to be generic enough to cover all the varieties of loss or lack of typical structure and/or function in any part of a person, whether that part has to do with an organ or an activity. For more narrowly defined terms and careful distinction among them, see Sheena L. Carter, "Impairment, Disability and Handicap," Emory School of Medicine, www.pediatrics.emory.edu/divisions/neonatology/dpc/Impairment%20MX.html. I am grateful to Kevin Timpe for calling my attention to this useful site.

⁶ It is not my intention to participate in the burgeoning and insightful literature on disability; but there is some overlap between that literature and the issues central for me here. I have learned and benefitted from Elizabeth Barnes's work on disability, but my focus here is not on disability per se. In addition to her book cited above, see also Elizabeth Barnes, "Valuing Disability, Causing Disability," *Ethics* 125, no. 1 (2014): 88–113; Elizabeth Barnes, "Disability and Adaptive Preference," *Philosophical Perspectives* 23 (2009): 1–22; and Elizabeth Barnes, "Disability, Minority and Difference," *Journal of Applied Philosophy* 26, no. 4 (2009): 337–55.

It is worth noting in this connection that even an impediment to the proper functioning of a human body and a consequent loss of some kind of physical thriving is not a disability. Striving for a workable account just of physical disability, Elizabeth Barnes says affirmingly,

The disability rights movement tends to count a physical condition as a disability (and therefore as something they're working to promote justice for) if it has some sufficient number of features such as: 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. As with most cluster concepts, there will no doubt be vagueness and borderline cases.

Barnes seems to me right in this characterization. By itself, then, an impediment to thriving does not count as a disability, whatever the nature and severity of the impediment, if for no other reason than that a disability is at least in part a function of the society in which a person who has the impediment lives. What is at issue in what follows is therefore not disability, but the lower-level notion of an impairment or impediment⁸ and the correlated contrary, thriving.