

## Diversifying Syllabi 2018 Text Summary and Teaching Tips

SECTION ONE: to be completed by presenter (1-2 pages max.)

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**Article/Essay Title:** “The Complicated Relationship of Disability and Well-being”

**Author:** Joseph Stramondo and Stephen M. Campbell

**Readability:** Easy/**Moderate**/Difficult

**Thesis:** That while the standard view of disability, i.e., the view that disability tends to have a negative impact on one’s well-being, is false, so are most versions of the claim that disability is neutral vis-à-vis well-being. Most disabilities are *intrinsically* neutral traits, but because disabilities are high-impact traits and individual circumstances vary widely, it is not the case that most disabilities are neutral in any other sense.

### Key Definitions:

The standard view of disability: disability tends to have a negative impact on one’s well-being

Neutral view of disability: disability have a neutral effect on one’s well-being

Disability: the class of conditions that are commonly labeled disabilities

Well-being: how well one is doing or faring, how well things are going for someone, how well someone’s life is going for her.

Harm: something that negatively affects your well-being

### Brief Summary:

The authors outline four interpretations of the standard view, and argue that each one is false. Much of the argument relies on problems with the generalization of the claim to all disabilities—perhaps the claim fits for a few, but not for many of the conditions that count as a disability.

- 1) Intrinsically bad—harmful or bad in and of itself
- 2) Instrumentally bad—harmful or bad because it brings about things that are intrinsically bad or prevents intrinsically good things from happening
- 3) Comparatively bad—harmful or bad insofar as it tends to render a person worse off than they would be without that trait; a comparison between one’s actual well-being and counterfactual well-being
- 4) Overridingly bad—prudentially bad on the whole, badly off, all things considered

The same interpretations can be offered of the neutral view. The authors argue that all but the first are false.

- 1) Intrinsically neutral—the authors think this is the case for most disabilities “considered in isolation from their effects and their interaction with one’s environment” (163).
  - The problem is that “disabilities do not exist in a vacuum. In combination with people's internal constitutions and eternal environments, the conditions that we label disabilities tend to have very real and very momentous consequences for people's lives---for their lived experience, their sense of self, their life-satisfaction, the

- contours of their relationships, their range of opportunities, their interests, and so on" (163).
- This wide variation is why the other three interpretations are false.
- 2) Instrumentally neutral
  - 3) Comparatively neutral
  - 4) Overridingly neutral

The authors argue that there is such wide variation in well-being amongst disabled folks because disabilities are **high-impact traits**: "traits that have a substantial causal impact on how a person's life unfolds" (166). Combined with variation in people's lives, this makes disabilities unlikely to be neutral in most cases.

A **probabilistic interpretation of the standard view** might be true: "having a disability is likely to be comparatively bad for a person" (168).

- This may be true for weird statistical reasons. Ex. because some disabilities are really comparatively bad, and becoming disabled can be extremely resource intensive. Also poor societal support in many cases. These will bring down the average.

#### Practical implications

- Abortion of disabled fetuses: belief in the standard view is a bad reason to abort a disabled fetus, because it is a false belief
  - o Even the probabilistic version of the standard view is a bad reason, because in any given case, the disability is unlikely to be overridingly bad
  - o Could have other reasons to abort, but these are bad ones
- Nondisabled people's interactions with disabled people
  - o Pity is an inappropriate attitude to take toward disabled people
  - o Curiosity about how disability has impacted someone's life is a more appropriate attitude
- Healthcare resource distribution
  - o Quality Adjusted Life Years (QALYs) assume some version of the standard view, and so are based on false assumptions

SECTION TWO: to be completed by note taker during discussion

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**Possible Applications:**

Intro to Ethics with utilitarianism  
Disability studies  
Oppression and Injustice  
Bioethics  
Meaning of Life (intro level)

**Complementary Texts/Resources:**

Elizabeth Barnes – gives argument for neutral account in *The Minority Body*  
Rosemary Garland Thompson- compulsory able bodiness  
Social model of disability- SEP  
EdEx unit on disability via KIE  
Deaf Gain: Raising the Stakes for Human Diversity H-Dirksen Bauman

**Possible Class Activities:**

Go through definitions and examples  
Argument structure mapping  
Videos on living with Downs Syndrom, Deaf Gain, etc  
Expand on practical implications section with student input  
Pity as a moral emotion in general  
Attentional activities- paying attention and doing reflections on ramps, how being in a wheelchair would affect day to day routine