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Chapter 10
"I'd Prefer Not To": Melville's Challenge to Normative Identity in *Bartleby, the Scrivener*

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10.1 Introduction

Okay, I know this may sound strange, but I often catch myself wondering about Bartleby. Herman Melville's enigmatic subject from his 1853 novella, *Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Story of Wall Street*[1] and his canonical refrain, "I'd prefer not to," comes to mind at the most inconvenient of times: while I am typing my final semester papers, while staring at a sink full of dirty dishes, or admiring the hardly worn soles of my running shoes. These are things that I know should be doing in order to feel proud and productive, things that I eventually convince myself to do, but still I get a perverse pleasure in simply imagining, through Bartleby, a space for my preferences to reign over my rationality.

I am not the only person that Bartleby has managed to stick with. Although Melville's contemporary critics mostly ignored *Bartleby, the Scrivener* when it was first published, in the twentieth century it earned the status as one of the masterpieces of American short fiction.[2] For those of you who may be unfamiliar with the story, an unnamed narrator relates to his readers the tale of a scrivener, a professional copyist, named Bartleby. Although at first Bartleby is an overly productive worker for the narrator, after 3 days he shocks the narrator by telling him that he would prefer not to check over his copies for errors, a standard but tedious part of the profession. The narrator decides that this is an inconvenient quirk that he can learn to ignore, but soon afterward Bartleby announces that he prefers not to work

[1] Originally published anonymously in two 1853 issues of *Putnam's Magazine* and published again by Melville 3 years *later in the Piazza Tales with five other short stories.* Melville (1967).

[2] Murray is one of many scholars who notes that it was well beyond Melville's death in 1891 that *Bartleby, the Scrivener* was recognized by literature critics and academics. See Murray (2008a, p. 51).

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at all, but also, much to the narrator's frustration, he would rather not leave the office either. Try as he might to explain Bartleby's behavior, Bartleby confounds all of the narrator's excuses for him. Over time, the narrator grows more and more desperate to either cure Bartleby of his strange preferences or be rid of him, which ends in his forced removal to the New York City prison known as the Tombs. When Bartleby decides that he prefers not to even eat, he wastes away and dies there, leaving the narrator to guiltily wonder what could have possibly been so wrong to make Bartleby... well... Bartleby.

10.2 Explaining Away Bartleby's Behavior

The story's appeal surely stems from our own inability to understand what drives him. Like the narrator, we search for a justification for Bartleby's nonconformity, his refusal to play by the rules of his professional environment. Scholars have gladly taken up the task of explaining Bartleby with wide-ranging results: through a Marxist lens that paints Bartleby as a hero in the face of capitalist demands,[3] as an actor of early nonviolent resistance,[4] and even as a Messianic figure.[5] In addition, scholars suggest that Bartleby's refusal to comply is a message from Melville to his own contemporary audience: his resistance to compromise his writing for their approval, a refusal to become a mere copyist of his earlier successful themes.[6] Some have also searched for a medical explanation, diagnosing Bartleby's puzzling preferences as proof of mental illness. First, in the 1960s and 1970s Bartleby was seen as schizophrenic[7]; now, according to some scholars, he is autistic.[8]

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[3] For example, David Kuebrich sees the relationship between Bartleby and the narrator as a representation of the conflict between capital and labor in the antebellum period. For Kuebrich, Bartleby's preferences are a response to the exploitative working conditions of Wall Street that Melville himself was sympathetic to. Kuebrich (1996).

[4] Desmarias describes Bartleby's passive resistance as a tool for fighting the imposing structure of his working environment. According to Desmarais, his refrain "I would prefer not to," is highly effective because, although it indicates that Bartleby will yield in his preferences to the narrator's requests, he will not. His polite and passive word choice is difficult for the narrator to challenge because it allows him a way out without ever overtly refusing. He becomes a hero to twentieth-century political movements interested in the strength of nonviolent resistance. Desmarais (2001).

[5] Deleuze defines Bartleby as the "new Christ": an "Original," that does not act in accordance to established laws and traditions, but is a unique and generative force to those around him. Deleuze (1998).

[6] Described in Chase (1949, pp. 147–148) and Arvin (1950, pp. 242–244).

[7] Beja diagnoses Bartleby as schizophrenic, suffering from a particular catatonic type of schizophrenia. He describes Bartleby's actions in the novella as symptoms of schizophrenia and mentions that Bartleby may have autism as well. Beja (1978).

[8] Murray states: "I want to claim that 'Bartleby the Scrivener' presents a radical narrative of autistic presence, and that it does so some ninety years before the condition began to be recognized within the terms of clinical medicine." Murray details the ways in which Bartleby's behavior connects this character to today's medical explanation of autism and believes that the interpretation of Bartleby as autistic is not simply one possible explanation for the story, but the story's foundational meaning. Murray (2008b, pp. 27–64).

Bartleby's historical diagnoses reflect changing attitudes within the medical field at large. Our understanding of autism emerged out of the study of schizophrenia, as the medical term was used first by Swiss psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler in 1911 as a symptom: "schizophrenics who have no more contact with the outside world live in a world of their own… This detachment from reality with the relative and absolute predominance of the inner life, we term autism."[9] In 1943, child psychiatrist Leo Kanner borrowed this term to define a separate condition he claimed was present in the 11 children he studied.[10] These early explanations linking autism to detachment are reflected in the current American Psychiatric Association's (APA) definition of autism spectrum disorder as a "complex developmental disorder that can cause problems with thinking, feeling, language, and the ability to relate to others."[11] According to the APA, currently the largest professional organization for psychiatrists in the world, there are three main characteristics of autism: first, difficulty communicating with others, including using and understanding language; second, difficulty interacting and relating to people, which often presents as an inability to make eye contact or read facial expressions; and finally, repetitive body movements and behaviors, including repetitive speech patterns.[12]

One of the difficulties of assigning the diagnosis of autism to Bartleby is that Melville wrote his novella almost 100 years before the medical term and its meaning even existed. How can Bartleby have autism, if autism did not exist? However, scholars have written convincingly about the ways in which Bartleby almost perfectly fits the model used by our contemporary medical community. There is a lot at stake for disability studies in claiming Bartleby as autistic, and therefore, disabled. It establishes autism as an authentic part of society, not an epidemic rampant only in our current period, as it has been claimed in certain incendiary political debates.[13] Also, Melville's story itself becomes a narrative about disability, its autistic figure not only central to this particular tale but to the larger canon of American literature. A Bartleby with autism stakes a strong claim for disability's crucial role in Western cultural production; disability cannot be concealed.

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[9] Bleuler (1911). Translated in Parnas et al. (2002).

[10] Kanner (1973).

[11] American Psychiatric Association (2016a).

[12] American Psychiatric Association (2016b). APA's classification of autism is outlined in its Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, a publication trusted and utilized by its international psychiatric community.

[13] This is a common claim in contemporary popular culture, particularly in the discourse concerning the disputed connection between required vaccinations for children and the development of autism. What is much less rarely debated is how a person with autism can positively impact society and live a meaningful life. It is often taken for granted that a life with autism is not a "full" or "social" one. I most recently came across this debate while reading a *New York Times* article about whether or not the Tribeca Film Festival should allow for the screening of a film that links vaccines to the development of autism in children. The film, *Vaxxed: From Cover-Up to Catastrophe*, claims that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention is covering up the knowledge that the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccine causes autism. Its claims are divisive, angering doctors, disability experts, and a large part of the filmmaking community, who call for its censorship. Belluck and Ryzik (2016).

However, even with the seeming appropriateness of the diagnosis for explaining Bartleby's actions, and while keeping in mind this reading's potential benefits for disability studies, I am wary about using any medical lens to explain Bartleby. I am worried about the ways in which a diagnosis of autism solidifies a particular understanding of Bartleby that allows us to end our search for answers. This interpretation brings both a kind of sympathy and self-satisfaction to Melville's story that was not previously available: Bartleby's death could have been prevented *if only* his nineteenth-century narrator possessed the knowledge granted by the gods of science to all of us now. The narrator and his readers are let off the hook; we could not understand Bartleby because of his *own* inability to relate. His repetition of "I'd prefer not to" takes on no deeper meaning than as a symptom of his condition.

10.3 The Limits of "Normal"

As scholar Michael Rembis warns in his book *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science and Delinquent Girls*, the so-called factual and unbiased medical knowledge often conforms to and supports hegemonic normativity. He argues that mental impairment "is not an immutable essence embodied in the disabled subject"[14] but instead a product of culture and its medical discourses, created and negotiated in an uneven relationship between professionals, patients, and others.[15] Although the scientific and social associations linked to autism are culturally constructed, its diagnosis for many individuals closes off any other lens for interpreting their behaviors. In an interview,

[14] In *Defining Deviance: Sex, Science and Delinquent Girls, 1890–1960*, Michael Rembis places Illinois's 1915 Involuntary Commitment Law within a larger national eugenics movement. The law allowed for the legal segregation of first-generation, white, working-class, American women who had been labeled deviant and defective through medical discourse, in order to "protect" both society and the women themselves from their own hypersexuality and potential offspring. Rembis reads against the grain of both medical and governmental archives, pointing out the socially constructed nature of seemingly fixed scientific categories such as impairment and intelligence. Scientific discourse gave authority to middle-class men and women to pathologize female sexuality. Rembis crucially elucidates the ways in which conceptions of impairment were modified to fit evolving scientific knowledge, all while continuing to connect the female body with an inherent and dangerous mental deficiency. Rembis (2011, p. 7).

[15] Rembis points out how necessary it was for scientists to prove that the defects within female patients were observable and quantifiable. If mental deviance was written on the body, then the American public wanted to know how in order to better protect themselves from exposure to the so-called defective. However, Rembis is quick to show us that institutionalized women were not simply passive victims in the creation of scientific discourse. Women were able to negotiate and push back against their prognosis, challenging scientific authority by running away, forming sexual relationships within the institution, continuing their educations, appealing to family members for release, or in their responses to scientists during the ritual of the exam. By describing them as neither complete victims nor guilty instigators, Rembis' narratives display the nuanced and complex lives of institutionalized women. Rembis (2011, p. 117).

blogger Amanda Baggs describes the cultural weight of the autistic label for her own everyday life:

> My strategy is to find what I need to do, then find a way to do it. If what I do seems to fit an autism stereotype, then so be it. If what I want to do seems to fit a stereotype of not being autistic, so be it too. I have had it with being controlled mindlessly by a set of requirements. I view "autistic" as a word for a certain part of how my brain works, not for a narrow set of behaviors, and certainly not for a set of boundaries of stereotype that I have to stay inside.[16]

Even a cursory study of autism reveals that science knows far less about the disorder's specificities than popular stereotypes suggest. In our collective minds, we conjure up an image based largely on the original scientific models linking autism to detachment: a male figure, isolated in his own body from the joys of social interaction.[17] However, autism in many ways serves as a catchall for a variety of communicative behavior labeled non-normative, with most scientists in agreement that there is no one cause and no singular manifestation of autism.[18] The problem then with labeling Bartleby as autistic is that it reveals more about our desire to control and reduce that which we do not fully understand than it does about the nature of the individual diagnosed as autistic.

Even without the label of autism, however, Bartleby remains a significant figure for disability studies because he defies and destabilizes the seeming logic of normativity. His presence calls into question our almost universal acceptance of what terms like "normal," "strong," "successful," and "productive" look like.[19] Although Bartleby seems to refuse to produce within his working environment, his "I'd prefer not to" is indeed productive, but not through a narrow capitalist lens. And certainly not in the narratives that we often encounter in popular disability depictions—the model of the so-called super crip—individuals whose disabilities are overcome through their unique effort, talent, and perspective and in spite of their bodily differences.[20] We see this model being used as a redemptive tool for people with

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[16] Baggs (2007).

[17] Draaisma argues that Kanner and Hans Asperger both offered influential models for autism, which have led to the development of the disorder's powerful contemporary stereotypes; for example, its depiction as a condition solely effecting men. Draaisma (2009).

[18] The Autism Spectrum Disorder fact sheet published by the American Psychiatric Association notes that autism acts as a "catch-all diagnosis of pervasive developmental disorder not otherwise specified." American Psychiatric Association DSM-V (2013).

[19] Scholar Julian Carter has proven in his book, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America 1880–1940*, that, at the turn of the twentieth century, the concept of "normal" was actually a racially and sexually marked ideal formed as a goal for all Americans. Although usually defined as standard or customary, Carter argues that the discourse of normalcy allowed Americans "the ability to construct and teach white racial meanings *without appearing to do so*." Therefore, the danger in normalcy is that the concept appears innocuous while it establishes a hierarchy that privileges hegemonic identity categories such as whiteness, heterosexuality, and ability. However, normalcy is only one of a slew of seemingly innocent terms hiding biased ideals that came to dominate the twentieth century. Carter (2007).

[20] Clare discusses his own battle to overcome the super crip narrative in the introduction of his book while detailing his attempt to climb Mount Adams with cerebral palsy. He contemplates the reasons why he feels compelled to perform certain acts to prove to himself and others that he has conquered his disability. Clare (2015, pp. 8–9).

autism, perhaps most famously in the case of the livestock scientist Temple Grandin. She not only pioneered cattle-handling facilities throughout the United States but also wrote in *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's* that without autism, "You would have a bunch of people standing around in a cave, chatting and socializing and not getting anything done."[21] Researchers and activists claim that respected figures such as Albert Einstein, Sir Isaac Newton, and Charles Darwin would not have been able to advance civilization without their autistic characteristics.[22] Scholars have even asserted that Bartleby fits such a model, identifying Bartleby's skill as his "exceptional knack for copying"[23] in his first 3 days of service. In other words, Bartleby is extraordinary because of his ability to assist his boss in an office environment before his pesky preferences begin. But Bartleby's narrative also creates a space to question why people, regardless of their differences, should have to execute some standardized level of industry in order to be tolerated in society. Who defines what makes a life successful?[24] Who exactly are we performing for?

Bartleby is extraordinarily productive: of such questions, of instability and uncertainty. Although the narrator prides himself on his constancy, Bartleby disrupts that self-image. When Bartleby utters, "I would prefer not to," the narrator moves through various extreme reactions: confusion, excitement, repulsion, fear, melancholy, and attraction. The narrator insists: "Indeed, it was his wonderful mildness chiefly, which not only disarmed me, but unmanned me."[25] Contrary to the ways in which we usually frame discourses of production, it is Bartleby's inaction that commands such disruptive change in the narrator's sense of being.

As Bartleby remains unmoved in his preference to opt out, the narrator notes that his influence permeates the office, infecting those around him. He worries:

> Somehow, of late, I had got into the way of involuntarily using this word 'prefer' upon all sorts of not exactly suitable occasions. And I trembled to think that my contact with the scrivener had already and seriously affected me in a mental way. And what further and deeper aberration might it not yet produce?[26]

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[21] Grandin (2011).

[22] Herman Melville has also been retrospectively diagnosed as autistic in the book *The Genesis of Artistic Creativity: Asperger's Syndrome and the Arts.* Fitzgerald uses biographical details from the book *Melville: A Biography*, by Laurie Robertson-Laurant, to make his case that Melville's writing was influenced by his undiagnosed Asperger's syndrome. Fitzgerald (2005). See also Muir (2003) and Lyons and Fitzgerald (2005).

[23] Pinchevski (2011, p. 42).

[24] Garland-Thomson sees Melville's narrative as one that reveals the workings of our institutional and ideological systems that judge whether a life with disability is worth living, what she refers to as the "cultural logic of euthanasia." For Garland-Thomson, Bartleby is a figure that cannot conform to cultural expectations and therefore can be eliminated, if not cured. She uses the example of Bartleby to explain how difficult the choice between living and dying can be for someone with a disability when societal standards teach us that unless one can find a cure and conquer disability, life will not be worth living. Garland-Thomson (2004).

[25] Melville (1967, p. 20).

[26] Melville (1967, p. 25).

The narrator understands Bartleby's behavior as dangerously contagious for those around him. His medical language helps him rationalize the necessity of amputating Bartleby for the sake of his corporate body. Although he cannot convince Bartleby to implicate himself in an excuse for his removal, the narrator realizes that a justified response is no longer necessary now that his office's health is at risk:

> Then something severe, something unusual must be done. What! Surely you will not have him collared by a constable, and commit his innocent pallor to the common jail? And upon what ground could you procure such a thing to be done? -a vagrant, is he? What! he a vagrant, a wanderer, who refuses to budge? It is because he will *not* be a vagrant then, that you seek to count him *as* a vagrant. That is too absurd.[27]

Irrational or not, Bartleby is charged and removed to prison under such vagrancy laws.

10.4 Conclusion

How weak is our normative system if it cannot overcome the inexplicability of one man? How strong must Bartleby have been to stand in his difference against the pressures of conformity? In one of the only occasions in which he diverts from his famous line when asked once again to explain himself, Bartleby demands: "Do you not see the reason for yourself?"[28] With that question he challenges the narrator and us all. Melville's story points to the fragility of our own self-definitions as normal as we unquestioningly perform acts to support a system that is made to seem bizarre by Bartleby's presence. The line between productive and useless, accepted and intolerable, normal and deviant is revealed to be insubstantial. Isn't it strange that the narrator, at the end of his life, feels compelled to tell us this tale about Bartleby? Why am I still thinking about him? Will you all now also find yourselves repeating the story of Bartleby, even if you would prefer not to?

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[27] Melville (1967, p. 35).

[28] Ibid., p. 26.

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