

Department of Biomedical Informatics
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Presenter: Dr. Barry Smith

Defining Disability

Basic Formal Ontology (BFO) is a top-level architecture used by over 300 ontology initiatives in biology, medicine and other fields. When applied to persons, BFO distinguishes three types of attributes: qualities -- such as temperature or height; roles -- such as the patient role; and dispositions -- such as the disposition to go bald or to sweat. Recently it has been proposed that BFO be supplemented with a treatment of a fourth kind of attribute, called 'capability'. Briefly, a capability is a disposition of a person which, when realized, brings benefits to that person or to some group to which the person belongs. Examples are: the capability to walk, to speak, to digest food. In this talk I will outline the BFO theory of capabilities. I will then develop on this basis a theory of disabilities. I will then show how this theory is contrasted with other accounts of disability, including the recent proposal of Elizabeth Barnes, according to which disability is based not on physical impairment but rather on social disadvantage.