As her title implies, Martha Minow’s *Making All the Difference* is about social change — making a difference. But the double entendre in the title is that Minow’s book focuses on a particular but pervasive social problem — the problem of difference. Formerly understood as the problem of prejudice or bigotry — mass contempt for and concerted discrimination against individuals simply because they belong to a minority or powerless social group — recasting the wrong of social exclusion as the problem of difference brings out the complexity of this injustice. Thinking of social exclusion solely in terms of the prejudice of the excluders reduces the problem to the despicable attitudes of a dominant group and leaves out two important dimensions of the problem: 1) the institutionalization of exclusion; and 2) the viewpoint of the excluded. Minow steadfastly refuses to simplify the problem of social exclusion. Nevertheless, she is guardedly optimistic that it can be overcome, for the central thesis of her book is that the problem of difference is not as intractable as it often seems. To make her case, she pursues a pair of interrelated strategies — one aimed at the way in which people think about difference, the other aimed at the way institutions respond to difference.

For Minow, the problem of difference is partly a problem about how we think about people. Instead of noticing individuals, we tend to consign people to exclusionary categories — sex, race, sexual orientation, disability, ethnicity, religion, and so forth — and then dismiss the people thus classified as inherently defective. In this way, difference — the neutral fact that people look different, act different, and choose different affiliations — degenerates into “difference”, the censiorious freighting of the facts of difference. Against this invidious drift, Minow maintains that difference always involves a reciprocal comparative
judgment — if you are different from me, I am different from you. Moreover, she claims that there is no objective standard from which deviation constitutes difference — norms are always conceived from a perspective, and no perspective is privileged.

But thinking about people in more fluid terms will not eliminate the problem of difference, for "difference" is memorialized in entrenched social practices. When established institutions and the policies they implement are taken to be natural and fair, any change that accommodates "different" people will disrupt the settled expectations of members of the dominant group — the people for whom these arrangements were designed and who accept them. As a result, such change will appear to interfere with these individuals' freedom and will be regarded as departing from neutrality in bestowing undeserved benefits on a new group of claimants. Yet, as Minow observes, the status quo is not neutral for members of excluded groups — their free choice and prospects for self-realization are obstructed by the very institutions and policies that serve others so well.

When unilateral ascriptions of "difference" are institutionalized in this way, the double bind of the "dilemma of difference" arises. As Minow points out, "[t]he stigma of difference may be recreated both by ignoring and by focusing on it" (20). By ignoring difference and treating everyone as the same, government may "freeze in place the past consequences of difference", but, by creating programs that acknowledge difference, government "make[s] those differences matter and thus symbolically reinforces them" (42). By pretending that women in the United States today are no different from men, equal opportunity guarantees that many women who have children and who take time off to care for them will be left behind in their careers. They have chosen, goes the familiar rationale, to put family ahead of professional advancement and thus to sacrifice work experience, which is after all a legitimate factor in promotion decisions. However, if government were to provide affirmative action for women who leave career tracks to care for pre-school children and who later wish to

1 Unless otherwise indicated, all parenthetical page references are to Making All the Difference.