Feminism Part 2: The Difference Approach

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Editor’s Note: This essay is the first in a three-part series on the topic of philosophical feminism. The first two parts, on the Sameness Approach to feminism and the Difference Approach to feminism, are by Annaleigh Curtis; the third part, on the Dominance Approach, is by Chelsea Haramia. The first essay is here and the third is here.

As I noted in Part 1 of this series, strands of thought that arise out of political movements are often difficult to categorize and also often answer to many names. The difference approach discussed here, following Haslanger and Hackett, is elsewhere sometimes called radical, cultural, or gynocentric feminism.

Recall that the basic nugget of thought underlying the sameness approach was the thought that men and women, in whatever way matters, are similar enough to warrant similar treatment. Insofar as they are denied similar treatment, they are wronged, and a system that denies them this treatment is wrong or unjust along the dimension of gender.

I noted a problem with this approach in the first essay, which was that similar treatment is not always the best answer to the kinds of wrongs women face and which feminism seeks to alleviate. The difference approach may be seen as an attempt to offer a feminist alternative that avoids this pitfall.

Whereas the sameness approach responds to the sexist—who claims that men are better than women in some relevant way—by asserting the sameness of men and women, the difference approach responds by turning the sexist’s argument on its head—at least sometimes, perhaps in many domains, women are better than men. Of course, what is claimed is really closer to this: traditionally feminine attributes and qualities have been undervalued or devalued by a male-dominated society and should be revalued to reflect their true worth. Depending on the particular view, the attributes and qualities associated with femininity may be so associated as a result of either natural tendencies, social tendencies, or a mix of these. At the same time, the difference approach exposes some ways in which masculinity is taken to be normal, neutral, and natural.

An example brings the view into sharper relief. Consider the women’s suffrage movement. John Stuart Mill, who we encountered as a proponent of the sameness approach, argued for women’s rights, e.g. to political participation, on the grounds that they were the same as men in the relevant ways. Jane Addams, using the difference approach several decades after Mill, argued that women had a right to political participation because they were uniquely suited to it. She argued that running a city required the same skills as running a home: keeping people clean, fed, fulfilled, and so on. Since women are adept at running homes, they should be adept at running cities, and should thus be afforded the right to vote. In this argument, it is women’s distinctive talents, whether these are due to natural or social factors, that give them special insight into the domain. This argumentative strategy accepts the sexist’s premise that there are differences between men and women, but rejects the claim that men are superior.

Others have made a similar argumentative move in other domains. Perhaps women have a distinct and valuable moral voice, as Carol Gilligan famously argued. Perhaps they provide unique agricultural knowledge, as Vandana Shiva has pointed out. Perhaps mothering makes them more peaceful, as Sara Ruddick suggested. Femininity is often associated with particular characteristics—passivity, emotion, community, home—set in opposition to other, supposedly masculine characteristics—activity, reason, individuality, work. While the latter set is often valued more highly by society, it is easy to come up with contexts in which the former should be preferred. If society were set up to value some of these characteristics more, we might all be better off.

One failing of the sameness approach was its difficulty dealing with cases where men and women really ought to be treated differently, like when
evaluating job candidates or college applicants in a system that has not given women an equal chance to succeed. The difference approach may escape this problem at the outset since it can easily justify differential treatment. Perhaps women’s experiences or qualities would make them suited to jobs in traditionally male dominated fields, but decision makers in these fields have been blinded by society’s undue focus on masculine traits. Revaluing the relevant feminine traits would result in hiring more women and better companies.

However, the difference approach may not go far enough. Staying with the hiring example, it may just turn out that characteristics coded as feminine are not helpful in a particular business context, whether because the business itself came to be in a world where masculine traits were preferred, by mere chance, or for some other reason. If this turns out to be the case, the defender of the difference approach seems to be stuck, hamstrung by her own argumentative technique of taking what has been devalued and elevating it. Instead of providing women with new opportunities across the board, it either constrains them to expanding into whatever areas in which they can convince others they add value or leaves them with the same opportunities but increased external appreciation. While these may be gains, they fail to account fully for the range of talents, experiences, and interests of both women and men.

Of course, a defender of the approach may be able to meet such an objection, just as a defender of the sameness approach may be able to meet the charges against it. Yet a deeper problem plagues both. As Catharine MacKinnon puts it, "[The sameness approach grants] women access to what men have access to. [...] The differences branch [...] exists to value or compensate women for what we are or have become distinctively as women (by which is meant, unlike men) under existing conditions.”

Despite their apparent differences, the sameness and difference approaches both take the initial system as given and fail to question adequately the construction of this sameness and difference in the context of a broader system of subordination. They fail to ask why the system was constructed this way and simply seek the best treatment for women within the system. The dominance approach, favored by MacKinnon and others, attempts to remedy this problem, and will be the subject of the third installment in this series.

Notes

2 I pause to note again the following: I talk about men and women in this essay as if those categories were real and exhausted the gendered possibility space. I do this mostly because the thinkers I discuss tended to do so. However, most feminists today accept that there is no hard and fast biological or social binary with men on one hand and women on the other. For an overview of ways in which sex, gender identity and expression, and sexual orientation come apart, see here.


References


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