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Feminism Part 1: The Sameness 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 second essay is [here](#) and the third is [here](#).

In both academic and non-academic discussions of feminism, there is sometimes a lack of appreciation for the diversity among feminist positions. Two people may be called feminists while disagreeing about a range of theoretical and practical issues, like the nature of oppression, sex work, or abortion. In this and the next essay, I lay out two general feminist approaches to sexist oppression: the *sameness* approach and the *difference* approach.¹ This first essay focuses on the sameness approach.

There are many ways of dividing up strands of thought, particularly when they have arisen organically out of a political movement. What is called the sameness approach here shares similarities with what elsewhere is called humanist or liberal feminism. The basic idea is that people ought to be treated equally, regardless of their physical or social characteristics. The general argumentative strategy is this:

Premise 1: If A and B are the same in the relevant respects, then A and B should be treated the same.

Premise 2: Women and men² are the same in the relevant respects.

Conclusion: Women and men should be treated the same.

This argument seems persuasive at first glance. If two things are the same in whatever ways really matter, it would be irrational to treat them differently. For example, if two job candidates are equally qualified for a job, it would be unfair to hire one just because he is a man. This sort of intuition guides the sameness approach. Notice that this approach does not have to say that men and women are exactly the same. The defender of this approach can admit that there are natural or socialized differences, just not in terms of what really matters. People may disagree, though, about what really matters: human dignity, intellect, a soul, certain capacities, whatever it might be.

One well-known philosopher who can be called a defender of the sameness approach is John Stuart Mill, best known for his writings on topics in ethics and political philosophy. Mill wrote that one thing that seems to distinguish the past and present is a casting away of various sorts of discrimination:

“[H]uman beings are no longer born to their place in life, and chained down by an inexorable bond to the place they are born to, but are free to employ their faculties, and such favourable chances as offer, to achieve the lot which may appear to them most desirable.”³

For Mill, meaningful distinctions among individuals could not be made based on irrelevancies like race, sex, or class.

Though the sameness approach has a lot of initial intuitive pull, there may be problems with it. Just take the example of the job candidates from before. We supposed that two candidates who were equally qualified should not be distinguished on the basis of sex. Consider two objections to the sameness approach relating to this example.

First, does the sameness approach entail that affirmative action is impermissible? After all, if it is wrong to distinguish between people merely on the basis of sex, then neither men nor women should receive jobs based on sex. Yet many feminists, including those who support the sameness approach, probably approve of some affirmative action in hiring. This same sort of objection has been made against race-based affirmative action, and it is sometimes even called “reverse racism.”

A standard response to these objections holds that affirmative action is justified because men and women, like white people and people of color, start off on very uneven playing fields in our society. Men, especially white men, have received undue advantages for many years, so it is not really unfair to preferentially hire women and candidates of color because this merely counters a long-standing bias against them.

It is not so clear whether or how this response can work with the sameness approach. Perhaps the defender of the approach must take the long view about what constitutes equal treatment, holding that some preference now makes up for opposite preference in days past. If so, then the defender of the sameness approach must spell this out in her theory.

Second, but related, there may be a difficulty with our original supposition that two candidates were equally qualified. After all, how often are candidates equally qualified? More to the point, should we address the possibility that women are likely to be systematically underqualified as a result of sexism prior to even being considered for a job? People do not receive the same education, opportunities, and encouragement as they develop. The sameness approach would demand change on these fronts, no doubt, but the defender of the approach may be hard-pressed to say what ought to be done between now and the just future they imagine. Treating everyone just the same if they have been treated differently for a very long time may just perpetuate the difference by assuring that those with a head start remain ahead.

The reader will find listed below several resources for reading about the sameness approach to sexist oppression, though it would also be instructive to observe debates in the news and among friends to see whether one can identify uses of this approach as well as the difference and dominance approaches to be discussed in Parts 2 and 3.

Notes

¹ A third approach, the *dominance* approach, is discussed [here](#). These divisions are taken directly from *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*, edited by Sally Haslanger and Elizabeth Hackett. They, in turn, find some basis in an essay reprinted in that volume by Catharine MacKinnon called “Difference and Domination: On Sex Discrimination.”

² 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](#).

³ J.S. Mill, “The Subjection of Women” <http://www.constitution.org/jsm/women.htm>

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Related Essays

[Feminism Part 2: The Difference Approach](#) by Annaleigh Curtis

[Feminism Part 3: The Dominance Approach](#) by Chelsea Haramia

About the Author

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