

Difference and Dominance

In her essay, MacKinnon sketches two approaches to sex equality, viz., the difference approach and the dominance approach..

1. What is the difference approach; what are its main principles? MacKinnon claims that there are "two paths" which emerge under this approach. What are these "two paths" and why do they both count as instances of the difference approach?

Legal mandate/Main principle: treat likes alike and unlikes unlike.

Two paths/branches:

- Sameness path: Be the same as men; grant women access to what men have access to. "...we're as good as you. Anything you can do, we can do. Just get out of the way." (245)
- Difference path: Sex is a difference; value/compensate women what they are or have become under existing conditions.

2. What problems are there with the difference approach?

- Sameness path: "The group realities that make women more in need of alimony [or other gender-specific needs] are not permitted to matter, because only individual factors, gender-neutrally considered, may matter. So the fact that women will live their lives, as individuals, as members of the group women, with women's chances in a sex discriminatory society, may not count, or else it is sex discrimination." (246)
- Differences path: In cases where women are segregated as a group, "there is no man to set a standard from which women's treatment is a deviation, [and so] there is no sex discrimination here, only sex difference." (247)
- "What the sameness standard fails to notice is that men's differences from women are equal to women's differences from men. There is an equality there. Yet the sexes are not socially equal. The difference approach misses the fact that hierarchy of power produces real as well as fantasied differences, differences that are also inequalities." (247)
- "The special benefits side of the difference approach has not compensated for the differential of being second class." (247)

3. MacKinnon says:

...the more unequal society gets, the less likely the difference doctrine is to be able to do anything about it, because unequal power creates both the appearance and the reality of sex differences along the same lines as it creates its sex inequalities.

What is MacKinnon's point here? Explain how this point functions as an argument against the difference approach.

4. Describe briefly the dominance approach, indicating how it differs from the difference approach.

- "On this approach, an equality question is a question of the distribution of power. Gender is also a question of power, specifically of male supremacy and female subordination. The question of equality, from the standpoint of what it is going to take to get it, is at root a question of hierarchy...." (248)
- "Gender might not even code as difference, might not mean distinction epistemologically, were it not for its consequences for social power." (249)

- In the case of much of women's subordination, "because the treatment is done almost uniquely to women, it is implicitly treated as a difference, the sex difference, when in fact it is the socially situated subjugation of women." (249)
- "...if gender is an inequality first, constructed as a socially relevant differentiation in order to keep that inequality in place, then sex inequality questions are questions of systematic dominance, of male supremacy..." (250)

5. What does MacKinnon mean when she says, "When [whether women should be treated unequally] is exposed as a naked power question, there is no separable question of what ought to be."? (251)

6. Does the dominance approach reject the idea that the sexes should be treated equally?

7. How does Bartky's analysis of the discipline of women's bodies support MacKinnon's dominance approach? She says, e.g., "Are we dealing in all this merely with sexual *difference*? Scarcely." (283) Does Bartky offer a "solution"? What does gender justice look like for Bartky?

MacKinnon, Catharine. "Difference and Dominance: On Sex Discrimination." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

Bartky, Sandre Lee. "Foucault, Feminism, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power." In *Theorizing Feminisms: A Reader*. Edited by Elizabeth Hackett and Sally Haslanger. Oxford University Press, 2005. © Oxford University Press. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <http://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

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