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# A Companion to Feminist Philosophy

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## Sexual difference theory

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Sexual difference theory can best be explained with reference to French poststructuralism, more specifically its critique of the humanist vision of subjectivity. The "post" in poststructuralism does not denote only a chronological break from the structuralists' generation of the 1940s and 1950s, but also an epistemological and theoretical revision of the emancipatory programme of structuralism itself, especially of Marxist feminist political theory. The focus of poststructuralism is the complex and manifold structure of power and the diverse, fragmented but highly effective ways in which power, knowledge, and the constitution of subjectivity combine. Poststructuralism questions the usefulness of the notion of "ideology," especially in the sense developed by Louis Althusser, as the imaginary relation of the Subject to his/her real conditions of existence. In a feminist version, ideology refers to the patriarchal system of representation of gender and, more specifically, to the myths and images that construct femininity. Subjectivity is conceptualized therefore as a process (*assujettissement*) which encompasses simultaneously the material ("reality") and the symbolic ("language") instances which structure it. Psychoanalytic notions of identity, language, and sexuality – especially in the work of Jacques Lacan – play a central role in the redefinition of the subject as a process, rather than in the more traditional sense of a rational agent. The notion of difference emerges as a central concept in the poststructuralists' critique of both classical humanism and of the humanist legacy of Marxist-inspired structuralist social theory. It includes both differences within each subject (between conscious and unconscious processes), as well as differences between the Subject and his/her Others.

The American reception of poststructuralist theories of difference, which Donna Stanton (1980) described in terms of a transatlantic "disconnection," resulted in a series of polemical debates about the interrelation between the material and the symbolic reality and language, which tended to focus on the structure of power and the possibility of resistance to it. As Elizabeth Wright argues (1992), a stalemate debate around "essentialism" opposed French-oriented sexual difference theories to American-based "gender" theories throughout the 1980s. Whereas "gender" theorists understand the construction of masculinity and femininity as more determined by cultural and social processes, sexual difference theorists also understand it as determined by unconscious processes such as identification and internalization. A critical reevaluation of the whole debate was undertaken in the 1990s, under the joint impact of

postcolonial theories, the work of black women, women of color and of lesbian and queer theorists, as well as by an increasing diversification of positions within the European philosophies of sexual difference.

In order to avoid the polemic, while attempting to do justice to the complexity of the issues raised by sexual difference, I will concentrate on the work of Luce Irigaray because, as Whitford argued (1991), she is the most prominent figure. I will distinguish between three different aspects of this theory: its analytic or diagnostic effect; its function as a political cartography; and the utopian aspect.

### **Sexual difference as diagnostic map**

Sexual difference theory states the obvious but in so doing also radicalizes it. The main philosopher of sexual difference, Luce Irigaray, following on from Simone de Beauvoir's analysis of the dialectics of the sexes, focuses at first on the difference between masculine and feminine subject positions [1974] (1985a). Irigaray relies on the theoretical toolbox of poststructuralism, however, especially on Lacanian psychoanalysis, linguistics, and literary theory, to bring into focus the dissymmetrical power relations that underlie the construction of woman as the Other of the dominant view of subjectivity. This dominant view is defined in terms of phallogocentrism. This term refers simultaneously to the fact that, in the West, thinking and being coincide in such a way as to make consciousness coextensive with subjectivity: this is the logocentric trend. It also refers, however, to the persistent habit that consists in referring to subjectivity as to all other key attributes of the thinking subject in terms of masculinity or abstract virility (phallogocentrism). The sum of the two results is the unpronounceable but highly effective phallogocentrism.

This notion involves for Irigaray both the description and the denunciation of the false universalism which is inherent in the phallogocentric posture: one which posits the masculine as a self-regulating rational agency and the feminine "Other" as a site of devaluation. Going beyond the Hegelian scheme, so prevalent in Beauvoir, Irigaray focuses on the perverse logic of this dualism. It assumes that the phallogocentric system functions by constituting sets of pejorative "Others," or negative instances of difference. In such a system, "difference" has historically been colonized by power relations that reduce it to inferiority. Furthermore, it has resulted in passing off such differences as "natural," which then made entire categories of beings into devalued and therefore disposable entities. Power, in this framework, is the name given to a strategic set of close interrelations between multilocalized positions: textual, social, economic, symbolic, and other sorts of positions. Power, in other words, is another name for the political and social currency that is attributed to certain notions, concepts, or sets of meanings, in such a way as to invest them with either "truth value" or with scientific legitimacy. To take the example of misogyny and racism: the belief in the inferiority of women and people of color – be it mental, intellectual, spiritual, or moral – has no serious scientific foundation. This does not prevent it from having great currency in political practice and in the organization of

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society. The corollary of this is that the woman or the person of color as "Other" is "different from" the expected norm: as such s/he is both the empirical referent for and the symbolic sign of pejoration. Because of this specific position, however, the devalued Other functions as a critical shaper of meaning. Devalued or pejorative Otherness organizes differences in a hierarchical scale that allows for the management and the governability of all gradations of social differences. By extension, therefore, the pejorative use of difference is no accident, but rather it is structurally necessary to the phallogocentric system of meaning and the social order that sustains it. It just so happens that the empirical subjects which are the referents for this symbolic pejoration experience in their embodied existence the effects of the disqualification. At this level, sexual difference is a powerful critique of philosophical dualism and of binary habits of thought. In the same vein, it also challenges the categorical binary opposition of the symbolic to the empirical within psychoanalytic theory.

The sexual difference approach, in other words, dislodges the belief in the "natural" foundations of socially coded and enforced differences and of the system of values and representation which they support. Moreover, this approach emphasizes the need to historicize the very notions and concepts it analyzes, first and foremost among them the notion of difference. This emphasis on the historical embeddedness of concepts, however, also means that the thinker needs some humility before the multilayered and complex structure of language.

The implications of this analysis are far-reaching: phallogocentric logic is embedded in language, which is the fundamental political myth in our society. In the poststructuralist framework, language is not to be understood as a tool of communication, following the humanistic tradition. It is rather defined as the site or location where subject positions are constructed. In order to get access to language at all, however, one has to take up a position on either side of the great masculine/feminine divide. The subject is sexed, or s/he is not at all.

Against the tendency of Freudian psychoanalysis to fix psychic structures through biological references, Irigaray and other sexual difference theorists problematize the question of the connection of morphological men and women to culturally coded roles of masculinity and femininity. Morphology replaces biological deterministic readings of the body with a psychosexual version of social constructivism. Morphologies refer to enfolded, experiential understandings of the bodily self. As Elizabeth Grosz points out (1989), these experiences are mediated through discursive practices (biological, psychological, psychoanalytic discourses) which construct social representations. Embodied subjects are expected to adhere to these representations by internalizing them. Thus, although language is posited as a structure that is prior to and constitutive of subjectivity, the sexed subject positions that structure identity (M/F) are neither stable nor essentialistic. A fundamental instability in the subject's attachment to either masculine or feminine positions is proposed instead as the site of resistance to fixed or stable identities of any kind. The subject is both sexed and split, both

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resting on one of the poles of the sexual dichotomy and unfastened to it. The "linguistic turn" thus defined therefore provides sexual difference philosophy with a materially grounded historicized and yet ubiquitous structure on which to base its vision of subjectivity.

It is important to stress the political implications of this definition of language: the phallogocentric code being inscribed in language, it is operational no matter who happens to be speaking it. This emphasis on the in-depth structures or syntax of language implies that there is no readily accessible, uncontaminated, or "authentic" voice of otherness, albeit among the oppressed. This turns into an attack on the essentialism of any radical epistemological claim to authenticity. Claims to epistemological or political purity are suspect because they assume subjectpositions that would be unmediated by language and representation.

Irigaray radicalizes the psychoanalytic insight by showing, especially in her psycholinguistic studies, how morphology interacts with linguistic definitions in a very dynamic manner. Moreover, she focuses on female morphology as a privileged site of production of forms of resistance to the phallogocentric code. To conclude the diagnostic map, I would say that sexual difference provides a political anatomy of the in-depth structures of phallogocentrism, which is defined as intrinsically masculine, universalistically white, and compulsorily heterosexual. Moreover, it locks the feminine in a double bind: on the one hand it glorifies maternal powers to the detriment of the empowerment of female subjectivity, but on the other hand it stresses the fact that matricide is the foundation of the male psychosocial contract as well as femininity. Phallogocentrism is, in fact, the Law of the Father and it confines the mother to symbolic insignificance. Feminist resistance to phallogocentrism consequently takes the form of a reappraisal of the maternal as a site of empowerment of woman-centered genealogies. Irigaray claims these counter-genealogies as the start of an alternative female symbolic system.

### **Sexual difference as political cartography**

The philosophy of sexual difference suggests that, because the specular relation between Subject and Other is dissymmetrical, especially in terms of power relations between the sexes, there is no possible reversibility between their respective positions. Moreover, this dissymmetry is proposed as the foundation for a new phase of feminist politics, especially in the Italian feminist reception of Irigaray's work (Milan Women's Bookstore Collective 1990). The argument runs as follows: the fact that the two poles exist in a dissymmetrical power relation toward each other also affects their respective relationship to otherness. In the phallogocentric system, argues Irigaray, women's "otherness" in relation to each other remains unrepresentable because the peripheral "other" is conceptualized in function of and in relation to a masculine center. Irigaray refers to the former as "the other of the Other" and to the latter as "the Other of the Same." Under the heading of "the double syntax" Irigaray defends this irreducible and

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irreversible difference not only of Woman from Man, but also of real-life women from the reified image of Woman-as-Other.

Hence the feminist poststructuralist critique of Beauvoir's "emancipationism," or "equality-minded thought," which is perceived as naive insofar as it assumes that women can simply "grab" transcendence as a point of exit from the paradox of femininity as a systematically devalued site of otherness. Irigaray argues instead that the terms of the dialectical opposition are not reversible, either conceptually or politically. The theory of sexual difference rather banks on the politically subversive potential of the margins of excentricity that women enjoy from the phallogocentric system: it is women's relative "non-belonging" to the system that can provide margins of negotiation for alternative subject positions. Whereas Jacques Derrida's deconstructive philosophy is quite contented with confining the feminine to such margins of noncoincidence with the phallic signifier, sexual difference feminists aim to use these margins to experiment with alternative forms of female empowerment. These margins, however, must be negotiated through careful processes of undoing hegemonic discourses at work not only in dominant culture, but also within feminist theory itself.

Sexual difference as a strategy of empowerment thus is the means of achieving possible margins of affirmation by subjects who are conscious of and accountable for the paradox of being both caught inside a symbolic code and deeply opposed to it. This is why the feminist philosophy of difference is careful in speaking of margins of nonbelonging to the phallic system. In reverse, one could also speak of areas of belonging by women to the same system they are trying to defeat. The point worth stressing is that, willingly or not, women are complicitous with that which they are trying to deconstruct. Being aware of one's implication or complicity lays the foundations for a radical politics of resistance which will be free of claims to purity but also of the luxury of guilt.

Sexual difference theory thus stresses the positivity of difference, while opposing the automatic counter-affirmation of oppositional identities. Feminists need to revalue discourses and practices of difference, thus rescuing this notion from the hegemonic connotations it acquired in classical philosophical thinking. This reappraisal of difference is proposed as a political practice, which coincides with the critique of a humanistic understanding of subjectivity in terms of nationality, self-representation, homogeneity, and stability. This view of the subject is questioned in the light of its dualistic relation to otherness. More specifically, sexual difference theorists politicize habits of metaphorization of the feminine as a figure of devalued difference. Thus, Irigaray pleads for a feminist reappropriation of the imaginary – that is to say of the images and representations that structure one's relation to subjectivity. Language thus becomes a site of political resistance.

I argued earlier that psychoanalytic theory plays an important role in theorizing the fractured vision of the subject. One of the lasting lessons of psychoanalysis is the insight that the notion of "Woman" refers to a female sex being morphologically constituted and socialized so as to conform to the institution of femininity. In keeping with Foucault's understanding of embodied subjectivity, femininity is

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understood as both a monument and a document. It is both a set of social conventions and a set of social, legal, medical, and other discourses about a normal, standardized female type. In opposition to essentialistic and biologically or psychically deterministic accounts of femininity, psychoanalysis suggests that one is constituted as a woman through a series of mostly unconscious identifications with feminine subject positions (see Article 27, *PSYCHOANALYTIC FEMINISM*). In a more political reading of this idea, Irigaray suggests Beauvoir was not systematic enough when she asserted that "one is not born, one becomes a woman": this assertion must be extended to cover unconscious structures and forms of identifications which resist willful and conscious processes of political transformation. Irigaray's emphasis on the in-depth structure aims at radicalizing Beauvoir's formula by extending it to unconscious identity formations. The vision of the subject that emerges from this is firmly anti-Cartesian in that it challenges the classical coincidence of subjectivity with consciousness. Feminist politics challenges the structure of representation and the social and political values attributed to Woman as the Other of the patriarchal system, but also extends this challenge to the deep structures of each woman's identity.

The corollary of the above is crucial: it implies that the women who undertake the feminist position – as part of the process aimed at empowering alternative forms of female subjectivity – are split subjects and not rational entities. Each woman is a multiplicity in herself: she is marked by a set of differences within the self, which turns her into a split, fractured, knotted entity, constructed over intersecting levels of experience. Irigaray, as most psychoanalytic feminists, focuses especially on the discrepancy between unconscious desires and willful choices. This deeply anti-Cartesian vision of the subject is not gratuitous, but it rather aims at providing a more adequate and consequently politically more effective mapping of the complexities that surround female agency. It complexifies and updates an important question: why do not all women desire or long for freedom and autonomy? Why do they not desire to be free?

The feminist subject, in other words, is not a purely volitional or self-representational unit: she is also the subject of her unconscious and, as such, she entertains a set of mediated relationships to the very structures that condition her life-situations. There is no unmediated relation to gender, race, class, age, or sexual choice. Identity is the name given to this set of potentially contradictory variables: it is multiple and fractured; it is relational in that it requires a bond to the "others"; it is retrospective in that it functions through recollections and memories. Last but not least, identity is made of successive identifications, that is to say of unconscious internalized images which escape rational control.

### **Sexual difference as utopia**

The question then becomes: how to unfasten one's attachment to and identification with certain images, forms of behavior and expectations that are constitutive of femininity? In answering this question, sexual difference becomes a theory of

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female empowerment, based on a strategic use of repetition. It is utopian as in a-topos, that is, it has no foundations as yet, it is "nowhere" – but it does point to a process of significations that has already started. Irigaray calls "mimesis" the strategy that consists in revisiting, reappraising and repossessing the female subject-position by women who have taken their distance from Woman as a phallogocentric support-point.

The starting point for the project of sexual difference is the political will to assert the specificity of the lived, female embodied experience. This amounts to the refusal to disembody sexual difference into an allegedly "postmodern" subjectivity; while it reasserts the will to reconnect the poststructuralist project of deconstruction of fixed subjectivity to the social and political experience of embodied females. The philosophy of sexual difference argues that it is historically and politically urgent to bring about empowered notions of female subjectivity. Feminism is the strategy of working through the sedimented layers of meanings and significations surrounding the notion of Woman, at the precise moment in its historicity when, because of the decline of classical humanism, this notion has lost its substantial unity. Thus, as a political and theoretical practice, feminism unveils and consumes the different representations of Woman in such a way as to open up spaces for alternative representations of women within this previously fixed essence which has been challenged by postmodernity. Postmodernity has made femininity available to feminists as that which needs to be deconstructed and worked upon.

Mimesis as the politics of "as if" is a careful use of repetitions which confirms women in a paradoxical relation to femininity, but also enhances the subversive value of the paradoxical distance that women entertain from the same femininity. The political gamble is clear and the stakes are high: for sexual difference theorists, the new is created by revisiting and burning up the old. The quest for alternative representations of female subjectivity requires the mimetic repetition and the reabsorption of the established forms of representation for the post-Woman women. The signifier woman cannot be relinquished by sheer volition: it must be consumed and reappraised from within.

As I suggested briefly before, an important element of the mimetic repetition is, for Irigaray, the sense of women's genealogies, which I read as a politically activated counter-memory. A feminist is someone who thinks through her experience as a woman and through shared experience with other women. A feminist is someone who forgot to forget her bond to other women: a bond that is made not only of a shared oppression, but also of commonly experienced joys and ways of knowing. I refer to this subject-position as "the female feminist." Genealogies constitute a symbolic legacy of female embodied and embedded experience, the starting point for which is the en fleshed location of the body. Remembering that the en fleshed or embodied self is, for Irigaray, a de-essentialized entity, which she reads with psychoanalytic insight, the bodily self can best be described as the intersection of many fields of experience and of social forces. In a phallogocentric system, women are socialized into thinking through a masculine



symbolic structure which is sustained by an imaginary that reduces them to "the Other of the Same." Female feminist genealogies as counter-memories are a way of breaking through the mighty power of the phallic signifier and opening up spaces for women to redefine collectively their singular experiences as "Other of the others."

Sexual difference is not to be understood, therefore, as an unproblematic category, nor is it to be radically separated from the workings of other categories, such as class, race, ethnicity, and other coded social differences. It does continue to privilege, however, sexed identity – the fact of being embodied female – as the primary site of resistance. This site is defined as a process of constitution of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory facets or subject-position, as Teresa de Lauretis suggests (1987b).

One of the most interesting new perspectives is offered by the intersection of sexual difference theory with other differences. The French school of sexual difference has come under criticism for its color-blindness and its disregard of race and ethnicity issues. Following Butler and Scott (1992) the question can be reformulated in terms of the points of convergence between poststructuralist critiques of identity, and recent theories by women of color and of black feminists to expose the whiteness of feminist theory. In postmodernity, what is needed are new transversal or intersectional alliances between postcolonialism, poststructuralism and post-gender theories (Trinh T. Minh-ha 1989, Spivak 1987b). This would correspond to new interdisciplinary dialogues between philosophy and fields such as legal studies, critical studies and film theory, social and political thought, and economics and linguistics. The common running thread could be: which accountability is available to feminists working outside the reference to a universal, coherent, and stable self and yet still committed to agency, the empowerment of women and to theoretical and methodological accuracy?

Another important new area of study is the relation between philosophical style and political agency. Sexual difference as a highly distinctive mode of philosophical thought has brought a new style into feminist philosophy: in a radical redefinition of interdisciplinarity, sexual difference thinkers open the discipline of philosophy up to dialogical exchanges with all sorts of other (non-philosophical) discourses. Moreover, the utopian dimension of sexual difference inaugurates a visionary mode of thinking where the poetic and the political intersect powerfully.

Moreover, the anti-Cartesian vision of subjectivity which is implicit in sexual difference philosophy has the advantage of allowing for a political reading of affectivity. Thus, feminism gets redefined as the passion of sexual difference, that is to say as an object of desire for women who no longer recognize themselves in the phallogocentric "Other of the Same," that is, Woman. A female feminist could thus be seen as someone who longs for and tends toward the empowerment of other representations of being-a-woman. The feminist project is no longer described only in terms of willful choice, but also in terms of desire, that is to say un-willful drives. Consequently political passions, and the political analysis of affectivity that accompanies them, emerge as a central issue. This

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also requires a critical reappraisal of the notion of desire itself. Irigaray, not unlike Deleuze, challenges the equation between desire and negativity or lack, which also constitutes a Hegelian legacy in Lacanian psychoanalysis, and proposes instead desire as the positive affirmation of one's longing for plenitude and well-being – a form of felicity, or happiness. What the feminism of sexual difference wants to free in women is thus also their desire for freedom, justice, self-accomplishment, and well-being: the subversive laughter of Dionysus as opposed to the seriousness of the Apollonian spirit. This political process is forward-looking, not nostalgic: it does not aim at the glorification of the feminine, but rather at its actualization or empowerment as a political project aimed at alternative female subjectivities. It aims to bring into representation that which phallogocentrism had declared unrepresentable and thus to do justice to the sort of women feminists, in their great diversity, have already become.