BEYOND EQUALITY AND DIFFERENCE: SEXUAL DIFFERENCE IN THE WORK OF ADRIANA CAVARERO

by

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Introduction

What has been termed the "equality/difference" debate still haunts feminism both at the level of feminist strategy and feminist philosophy. Cavarero’s contribution to difference feminism can be introduced within the context of this debate. Put crudely, in terms of feminist strategy an impasse was reached between reliance upon:

1. the argument that women should have the same civil rights etc. as men because we are like men, equally rational etc.; and
2. the argument that women are different and should not minimise our differences from men to achieve equality.

In terms of theory, the “equality/difference” debate therefore centres around the meaning of “sexual difference”.

As Irigaray¹ has illustrated, one problem in characterising the debate in this way is that man remains the neutral measure against which woman either is or is not similar. In Irigaray’s terms she remains “the other of the same”. (The radical nature of Irigaray’s project has been to think of difference starting with the position of women as the tain of the mirror, “the other of the other”.) The debate, as outlined, also fails to focus upon areas of difference between women, such as race, a point to which I will return in the discussion of Cavarero’s work.

Cavarero stresses that sexual difference is "given". In this sense she agrees with Arendt’s comment,

There is such a thing as basic gratitude for everything that is as it is; for what has been given and was not, could not be made; for things that are

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This is a continual theme in her work from the questions of “what is woman” to the emphasis on “who is the subject?” For Cavarero, “the” body is given. However, it is never “the” body in the abstract. It is always either my body or your body, always already sexed. This fact of being,

first of all a whole of mind and body, a female living person gendered in difference ... situated in this space, at this time and in this corner of the world to which my mother is the threshold

is viewed as,

the irreducible concreteness of which I am made ... Like all facts it demands a meaning that does not disavow reality. Therefore I will be this woman or this man never man.

This stress upon sexual difference was initially caricatured as “essentialist” by feminists in the US and UK, concerned that women’s subordination has been justified by appeals to innate difference. This easy dismissal has been successfully challenged, for example within De Lauretis’ “The essence of a triangle or, taking essentialism seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S. and Britain”. Cavarero’s work clearly cannot be criticised as essentialist. Her concern is to intervene at the level of the symbolic to rethink sexual difference.

She acknowledges Irigaray as a strong influence within Italian

6 For discussion of this point in the context of the reception of Irigaray’s early work see T. Chanter, *The Ethics of Eros* (London: Routledge, 1995), especially 44-46.
7 T. De Lauretis, “The Essence of a Triangle or, Taking Essentialism Seriously: Feminist Theory in Italy, the U.S. and Britain”, in N. Schor and E. Weed, *The Essential Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 1-39. (There is insufficient space in this paper to rehearse this — now well worn — debate.)