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Looking Past the Web to See the Garden: An Exploration of Epistemological Metaphors

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In their paper *Identity, Oppression, and Power: Feminism and Intersectionality Theory*, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff present those who engage with intersectionality with three challenges: avoid essentializing any one expression of identity (race, sexual orientation, class) over another, acknowledge interconnected privileges as well as oppressions, and pay mind to the changes in context that shift the designation of social identity and status. These challenges serve as an unpacking of the more general definition and purpose of intersectionality that “proposes that gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame without also exploring how issues of race, migration status, history, and social class, in particular, come to bear on one’s experience as a woman.” In this paper, dissatisfaction with intersectionality is taken to be a symptom of an insufficient epistemological picture. I very briefly touch on the epistemological setting offered to us by Descartes and move on to examine that provided by Quine at somewhat greater length and show how neither offers us sufficient tools to interact with people in a manner that would satisfy the intersectionalist. I then present a metaphor that I suggest our epistemology would need to grow out of for us to sufficiently deal with intersectionality.

In their paper *Identity, Oppression, and Power: Feminism and Theory*, Samuels and Ross-Sheriff present those who engage with intersectionality with three challenges: avoid essentializing any one expression of identity (race, sexual orientation, class) over another, acknowledge interconnected privileges as well as oppressions, and pay mind to the changes in context that shift the designation of social identity and status (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 6). These challenges serve as an unpacking of the more general definition and purpose of intersectionality which, “...proposes that gender cannot be used as a single analytic frame without also exploring how issues of race, migration status, history, and social class, in particular, come to bear on one’s experience as a woman,” (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 5).

On the surface, there does not seem to be anything particularly controversial at work, however, critics have accused intersectionality of being nothing more than seductive pseudo-theory and of promoting discourse without disagreement (Carbin and

Edenheim, 15). In this paper, I will disagree with those critics and argue that intersectionality is a symptom of an insufficient epistemological picture. I very briefly touch on the epistemological setting offered to us by Descartes and move on to examine that provided by Quine at somewhat greater length, and show how neither offers us sufficient tools to interact with people in a manner that would satisfy the intersectionalist. I then present a metaphor that I think our epistemology would need to grow out of for us to sufficiently deal with intersectionality.

The Cartesian story of knowledge as only that which we can know with the utmost certainty has pervaded western thought since the *Meditations* were initially published (Mignolo 451). While Descartes himself would not, perhaps, have been likely to endorse the majority of the things that have erupted in his wake, his method of doubt started the ball rolling nonetheless.

The method of doubt requires one to reserve judgment on anything that she has not confirmed to be necessarily true through strict reasoning. Essentially, we come to genuine knowledge by thinking hard about an idea until we can see that it must be true. This method pits the empirically observable world against the rational individual, because our sense perceptions can so easily fool us. It was thought that because at times one thinks she sees something, when in reality nothing is there, that perception could not, on principle, meet the high standards Descartes set for any genuine source of knowledge. The empirically observable world was, in a certain sense, now the enemy. Yes, Descartes did get the existence of an externally observable world established by the end of the meditations, but it was still the last link in his inferential chain. The sensuous presentation of that world with all pleasures it affords is simply a consequence of God's goodness that we can regard with mild amusement, but never serious consideration, in our attempt to get real and worthwhile knowledge.

In this story, knowledge is nothing like the intricately connected web presented by Quine. Instead, it looks something like a pyramid, so that at the apex is the most self-contained idea, God. Our idea of God allows us to derive ideas about ourselves, our rational capacities, and the mathematical insights to which these give rise, until the bottom of the pyramid is what we often consider to be the biggest piece of our experiential lives – the physical world. Those things with which we interact on a daily basis, and which seem to make up the majority of our day-to-day activities in fact have the least significant impact on our knowledge of reality and our place within it. The Cartesian pyramid then, does not rest on its base but dangles from its apex.

Contemporary feminism, with its concern for contexts that make up a person's life, could not have functioned under an epistemology of this sort. Intersectionality is based on the notion that it is an inherently flawed perspective to imagine everyone as a slight variation of oneself. The Cartesian project never explicitly came to any sort of

resolution regarding other people but, the model of the person suggested by Descartes's meditation on his own nature left one to assume that either one was surrounded by human bodies that are merely empty, or that those around one were doing the exact same sort of thinking and being that she was.

On the surface, this reliance on analogy in considering the experiential lives of others seems to not be much of a problem. It is exactly what parents have been preaching for decades—put yourself in the other's shoes. Unfortunately, reasoning from analogy does not train us to put on another's shoes, but rather replace the original wearer with ourselves. This mentality is what leads some proponents of social change to falsely assume that "...underneath the superficial differences of skin color, genitalia, or behavior in the bedroom, Blacks, women, and gays and lesbians are really just like straight white men," (Naomi and Schema, 147).

Quine's naturalized epistemology and the metaphor that comes in its wake promise to undo at least some of the damage done by the Cartesian project; rather than focus on the ways we could rationally connect ideas while remaining skeptical about our sensory perceptions, Quine rooted knowledge in our empirical observations of the world laid out clearly and evaluated methodically, but also subject to some degree of flux. Rather than treat the "bombardment of our surfaces" as something from which we should distance ourselves, as the Cartesians did, Quine saw "...an improved understanding of the chains of causation and implication..." connecting those bombardments with our scientific ventures as incredibly important to epistemology, (Leonardi and Santambrogio, 349).

This account of knowledge lends itself to an image of a web. Our systems of belief form an intricate web where the outermost strands deal with the events of the physical world. When something occurs that seems incompatible with one or more of our beliefs, the system does not collapse, but rather waits for revision. We must look to see which beliefs both hold up and are supported by the incompatible observation, and make adjustments accordingly, going as deep into the web as we need in order to feel satisfied with our adjustment. This is different from the Cartesian method of doubt because while both focus on consideration of a belief in relation to the rest of the things we already know, for Quine "...our own direct observation..." is a pertinent point to consider, rather than the first point to be discredited (Quine and Ullian 13). More importantly, however, is the fact that even the center of Quine's web is subject to change. The basis for our knowledge is not the immobility of God's existence, but rather our commitment to the beliefs we already hold.

Quine's account of knowledge changes our landscape enough to provide contemporary feminism, with its prioritization of intersectionality to gain an epistemological foothold. In its most general sense, intersectionality is the notion that

no one aspect of a person's identity can constitute her *whole* identity and that when dealing with issues of social justice we must avoid assuming it does. Commitment to this acknowledgement of contexts originally came out of African American women's dissatisfaction with the early women's movement because it seemed as though they must disregard certain experiences in order to fit in to the white woman's struggle (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 5).

The five Virtues of Plausibility found in Quine's *Web of Belief* seem to provide the necessary tools for the intersectionality concerned feminist to go about her research thoroughly, while attending to the three challenges presented by Samuels and Ross-Sheriff. I will demonstrate, however, that while those virtues do go some distance down the road in meeting these challenges, they still do not allow us to deal with difference in a way that fully eliminates the tendency to reduce the other person to an extension of ourselves.

Quine's first virtue, Conservatism, states that the fewer beliefs a hypothesis displaces, the more plausible it is, which speaks to the concern that if our beliefs are based on the ever changing physical environment, then belief systems will be in a state of constant flux (Quine and Ullian, 41). Rather than drop the laws of gravity when we see a balloon floating in the air, we accept that there are gasses less dense than oxygen. This is not to say that we should be avoiding radically new approaches to ordering our views of the world, but rather that we need to remain cognizant that the longer the leap the greater the chance of failure. It is in our best interest to move step by step rather than implementing something that sounds promising but has no empirical tethers to reality; "conservatism holds out the advantages of limited liability and a maximum of live options for the next move," (Quine and Ullian, 41).

Modesty, Quine's second virtue of plausibility, is closely related to Conservatism as it states that the less surprising a hypothesis is, the more plausible it is (Quine and Ullian, 41). Stated more simply, the more modest something is, the more likely it is to cohere with our prior observations. This requires us to acknowledge that the empirically observable world really is what it appears to be, and that there are no secret meanings we must decipher. Take Quine's example of someone making a phone call and immediately hanging up; one assumes that the caller dialed the wrong number, not that the caller was a burglar determining if the house was empty. This assumption is made because misdialing is more common than breaking and entering, and therefore matches up more closely with our prior observations, (Quine and Ullian, 41).

Conservatism and Modesty both speak to Samuels and Ross-Sheriff's first challenge to "avoid essentializing any one expression of identity over another," (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 6). When we are in favor of vastly new conceptions of anything, it is often because we have decided that one aspect of it is key and, so long as that is done justice,

everything else can fall where it may. Neither Conservatism nor Modesty allow such behavior, and together they both prevent us from committing the same sins that feminism has historically committed, mainly, raising “female” to the throne as absolute without much concern for the rest of the pieces that make up a woman’s identity.

Simplicity states that the hypothesis that covers the most ground in the briefest and most unified way is most plausible (Quine and Ullian, 43). It is too much for us to expect nature as a whole to bend to our demands of simplicity, but when presented with two equally reasonable options, we should follow the simplest. For example, Newton’s hypothesis of universal gravitation was not simple in the familiar sense of the word, but it covered with one account what had previously taken two unrelated accounts, (Quine and Ullian, 43).

This third virtue at first seems contrary to the intersectionality concerned feminist’s project of bringing complexities to light, but it is actually key to Samuels and Ross-Sheriff’s second challenge that we “...acknowledge interconnected privileges as well as oppressions,” (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 6). Similarly to what Quine sees as happening in physics we must, “...sacrifice simplicity of a part for greater simplicity of the whole when we see a way of doing so,” (Quine and Ullian, 42). Newton’s more complicated theory of gravity allowed physics as a whole to become simpler, so too would a more complex understanding of what constitutes a woman’s identity allow a theory of human experience to become simpler because it would be more encompassing.

The fourth virtue of plausibility, Generality, has to do with the retention of evidence. We should not accept a new hypothesis that disregards all the evidence its predecessor found significant because, “the more general the hypothesis is by which we account for our present observation, the less of a coincidence it is that our present observations should fall under it,” (Quine and Ullian, 45). Rather, we should look for a hypothesis that manages to use the old evidence in conjunction with something else to create a more unified whole. When Einstein’s relativity overtook Newtonian physics, it did not throw the old theory away and start from scratch. Instead, it accounted for the things Newton could not, as well as those he could; Newton’s evidence became Einstein’s.

Generality is crucial to Samuels and Ross-Sheriff’s third challenge that we “pay mind to the changes in context that shift the designation of social identity and context,” (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 6). The focus of this challenge is not on the fact that the contexts change, but that there is more than one context at work. Historically, the women’s movement paid no mind to the fact that a privilege for a white woman may in fact be oppression for a black woman, and we are called to recognize that this disparity exists. Generality does not require us to make blanket statements, but (given the presence of many contexts which need to be “covered”) requires us to keep an eye on

all those contexts as part of a single approach rather than keeping the contexts, important, but disparate features.

Refutability, Quine's fifth virtue, states that there must be some imagined event that could refute the hypothesis, and it is measured by "how dearly we cherish the previous beliefs that would have to be sacrificed to save the hypothesis," (Quine and Ullian, 48). Samuels and Ross-Sheriff's third challenge is benefited by not just Generality but Refutability as well. To "pay mind to the changes in context that shift the designation of social identity and status," (Samuels and Ross-Sheriff, 6), we must recognize that it is not only possible, but most likely necessary that were we in a different place at a different time, our experience of someone's identity would be different. Put more simply, we are required to acknowledge that a different setting could refute our hypothesis about who another person is.

We have now seen how Quine's web is a more promising metaphor than Descartes's pyramid and that a case can perhaps be made that Quine's Virtues of Plausibility might be used by the intersectionality concerned feminist to ground her project in rigorous methodology. What we have not seen, however, is anything that would discredit the critics who say that intersectionality is an empty term being used to "promote discourse with out disagreement" and that it is simply "seductive pseudo-theory" (Carbin and Edenheim, 15). However, it seems like there is something important in intersectionality trying to make itself heard, so rather than moving too quickly to discredit it, we may be better served by discrediting the ways in which we talk about it.

If we are committed to intersectionality as having something more important to contribute to the public sphere than simply good research methods, this is presumably because it addresses issues of necessary interaction between people who have such drastically different experiences, that it seems impossible for either party to make any sense of the other. Quine might try to respond to such situations by saying that one or both parties needs to reevaluate their beliefs more deeply, until they can find a way to make what seem to be two incompatible systems collapse into one another. But, it is not clear his web metaphor allows him that way out, for the metaphor has built into it one of the most undesirable difficulties we have inherited from the Cartesian project. The problem with the web metaphor is that spiders do not make webs conjointly; no matter how intricate, any web is created by just one spider.

By committing to the web metaphor, we seem to be committing to either one web with one spider we all constitute, or multiple overlapping webs, each with its own spider. If we allow one web with one spider, then we are back to assuming that the other person is necessarily using the same sorts of materials that we are to think the same way that we do. This problem cannot be simply dissolved by allowing for multiple webs with multiple spiders, however. For, while we sometimes *speculate* that others are

participating in inaccessible modes of being, we are *certain* that they are when we conceptualize them as inhabiting webs that we cannot access.

With this in mind, it becomes clear how Quine's naturalized epistemology falls short of the epistemology that the intersectionality concerned feminist is advocating for. Carbin and Edenheim are quite right in saying that intersectionality is "one simple model in search of incomplete information," (Carbin and Edenheim, 239) insofar as it is understood as a call to pay mind to the crossing of different strands in Quine's web. The intersectionality concerned feminist's main point is not that a person's identity is made up of different pieces (segments of the web), but that within the other person there is something happening which I cannot analyze down, even in an attempt to fully understand it. Not because such an analysis cannot be done, but because it does no good. Our understanding of someone in terms of his or her "parts" (woman, student, white) does not give us a clearer or more accurate picture, and may in fact give us an inaccurate and incorrect one.

I would like to suggest that what we need is not a web, but a garden of belief. Quine's metaphor is insufficient insofar as it allows for only one sort of creating force per web, but its conception of beliefs as intimately and co-dependently connected is something worth preserving. A garden is made up of many different plants all inhabiting the same soil, under which their roots are closely intermingled. Observations which seem to contradict beliefs we already hold would be like a new seed being blown into the garden; that seed will either fail to take root (if we decide our initial belief is worth keeping) or will choke out another plant as it grows (if we decide our initial belief was flawed). Just as in Quine's web, the roots of the plants become so intertwined and dependent on one another that we cannot consider any one belief (or plant) in isolation.

The key distinction here, however, is that while a web requires a single spider for its creation, a garden could not be created from a single source. Apple trees and sunflowers inhabit the same space, both contributing to the overall structure of the garden equally, yet it is unnecessary (if not incoherent) to seek an explanation for how the two are really the same in either origin or purpose—they both have roots and are therefore equal participants in the garden of belief. Preoccupation with intersectionality, then, is not so much a project as it is a symptom of an insufficient theory. By recognizing a story of meaning with more than one source, the anguish involved in determining which sources should be analyzed out and which can be retained fade away, as there is no need to reduce one source into another.

On the surface, intersectionality in feminist theory is a demand for a reworking of our understandings of identity, what this requires, however, is much more complex. Until all traces of the Cartesian project are removed from our epistemology, it does not appear to be possible to understand the other as anything but a reconstitution of myself.

Quine's story of knowledge as a web of belief comes close, but its allocation of only one creator is still prey to the Cartesian mistake of turning the other into myself. By changing the web into a garden, however, we may come closer to fully removing the Cartesian inspiration and, in effect, come closer to an effective epistemology.

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