

The Invisible ‘And’

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Basing itself on Kristie Dotson’s outline and critique of the assumptions necessary to justify the avoidance of intersectional questions, this paper will develop an additional line of criticism separate to the one Dotson provides. In doing so, I will construct the meta-philosophical concept of the “invisible ‘And’ ” to reconcile the failure of the disaggregation assumption with the seemingly prominent existence of singular gender investigations in feminist theory. The “invisible ‘And’ ” is my claim that professedly “gender-only” (singular) inquiries are in reality “gender-and” (intersectional) ones, a fact which remain hidden due to the propensity of dominant social perspectives to falsely pass as neutral and subsequently fail to be mentioned.

1 Introduction

In this essay I will build on Kristie Dotson’s 2016 paper: “Word to the Wise: Notes on a Black Feminist Metaphilosophy of Race” and in articulating her arguments with reference to gender, show the statement “I do gender, not ‘gender and...’ ” to be problematic on multiple levels.

I will develop an angle of criticism different to the one Dotson provides and will argue that the statement illegitimately divorces the concept of gender from other social identities, thereby becoming unrepresentative of the real multitude of gendered experience. I propose my “invisible ‘And’ ” theory in an attempt to reconcile how ‘gender-only’ investigations, despite their irrationality, have seemingly not only been realized but are also of central importance to traditional feminist philosophy. The “invisible ‘And’ ” is the claim that dominant social identities often falsely occupy a neutral role such that mention of their presence is prone to disappearance. I conclude therefore that gender investigations are inevitably of a ‘gender and...’ nature, however hidden under a veil of ‘neutrality’ this might remain.

2 Dotson’s Three Assumptions and Intellectual Slumming

Dotson states how, from a black feminist perspective, an investigation of race as a singular phenomenon is obviously problematic. In analysing what allows this statement to be commonly and comfortably made, she outlines three assumptions, i.e., the disaggregation, fundamentality, and transcendental assumptions, one must make to justify stating “I do race, not gender”.¹

These three assumptions are necessary for any claim with the structure: “I do A, not A and B”, where A and B represent social categories (gender, race, religion, sexuality, class...). This applies to our case of “I do gender, not gender and B”. For most of this essay I will take B to represent race, as this is the case in most of the black feminist literature I will be discussing, though this is not a necessary condition for the validity of my argument.

The disaggregation assumption is the initial and most elementary one and is the focus of this essay. It refers to the notion that social categories can be divorced from one another and fruitfully discussed separately, thus implying that there exist ‘pure’ investigations which are analytically distinct from compound ones wherein multiple social categories are considered simultaneously. Topically, it is the assumption that race exists as distinct from race and gender; that gender, or race,

¹Dotson Kristie, *Word to the Wise: Notes on a Black Feminist Metaphilosophy of Race*, Michigan: Philosophy Compass, 2016

can legitimately stand as concepts in isolation.² Any singular discussion about social categories has necessarily held the disaggregation assumption as foundational, and such ‘gender-only’ discussions are regularly seen in feminist theory.

The avoidance of multifaceted questions, however, assumes not only their distinction from singular discussions, but also lack of utility in them. The disaggregation assumption alone does not suffice in maintaining that the two types of inquiries are not just separate but also conceptually unrelated. The view that ‘race-only’ investigations are irrelevant to ‘race-and’ ones therefore necessitates two further assumptions. First, that ‘race-only’ investigations are more fundamental and conceptually basic than ‘race-and’ ones and, by virtue of that, more centrally important. Second, that ‘race-and’ investigations cannot inform ‘race-only’ ones, while ‘race-only’ inquiries can impact ‘race-and’ ones. Here, a unidirectional flow of information is established. Dotson dubs the former the fundamentality assumption and the latter the transcendence assumption.³

These three assumptions work to create an asymmetric relevance structure by first distinguishing single and compound investigations as analytically distinct from one another, then by deeming single investigations to be more basic and thus more significant than compound ones and finally, by allowing only one investigation to inform the other.⁴

Dotson criticises the fundamentality and transcendence assumptions due to their propensity to promote ‘intellectual slumming’ and in doing so undermines the “I do race, not gender” statement. Intellectual slumming is used in reference to when a project which, despite using fewer intellectual resources, retains its central importance in the field of study by merit of being conceptually basic.⁵ Intriguingly, in choosing this path to criticism, Dotson neither directly attacks the validity of the assumptions themselves, nor the development from one assumption to another, but rather highlights the detrimental consequence of the persistence of said assumptions. I posit that this unorthodox method intentionally leaves other, perhaps more conspicuous, objections open for future development. I will now provide one such alternative criticism by focusing on the disaggregation assumption.

3 Intersectionality, Neutral Forms and the “Invisible ‘And’”

A strong base for the denial of the disaggregation assumption can be found in the writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw, a feminist thinker who coined the term intersectionality. Crenshaw rejects any homogeneous account of women’s experiences. She identifies the way in which social identities intersect and interact to create new accounts of womanhood by describing how each constituent component of one’s social identity is inevitably experienced through the intermeshed whole of all one’s other social identities.⁶ It is impossible to study gender separate from race because gender simply does not exist separate from race; hence to “do gender, not ‘gender and race’”, is to not provide an account of the gendered experience at all.

However, it seems that one of the most foundational pieces of feminist philosophy, namely ‘The Second Sex’ by Simone de Beauvoir, could be pointed at as a prime example of a “gender-only” investigation. Herein I see a contradiction, as one cannot simultaneously maintain that ‘The Second Sex’ is a sound and “gender-only” investigation and that it is unsound to conduct “gender-only” investigations. From this we can deduce that, either ‘The Second Sex’ is not a sound and “gender-only” investigation, or that “gender-only” investigations are indeed possible and are able to inform on gendered experience. The later, as shown above, does not hold due to the failure of the disaggregation assumption. It must follow therefore, by disjunctive syllogism, that ‘The Second Sex’ is not a sound and “gender-only” investigation, in other words (by DeMorgan’s laws), that ‘The Second Sex’ is either unsound or a not “gender-only” investigation, but rather

²Dotson, *Word to the Wise*, 70

³Dotson, *Word to the Wise*, 70-71

⁴Dotson, *Word to the Wise*, 71

⁵Dotson, *Word to the Wise*, 71-72

⁶Crenshaw Kimberlé, *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics* Chicago: University of Chicago Legal Forum, 1989

a “gender- and” one. Claiming the entirety of one of the most influential and decisive pieces of 20th century philosophy to be unsound based on this limited evidence would not only be bold but largely unfounded. Therefore, it is my thesis that even in texts which might be intended as singular investigations such as ‘The Second Sex’, there will always be an element of a, perhaps unconscious, intersectional analysis. I dub this unseen element the “invisible ‘And’”. To elaborate on my concept, I will use the notion of neutral form found in “The Second Sex” itself.

Simone de Beauvoir argues that it would be inaccurate to describe the terms ‘man’ and ‘woman’ as a symmetrical, equivalent, pair. In truth, ‘man’ often occupies also the neutral position, while ‘woman’ is defined only by its difference to ‘man’. Beauvoir details how in a patriarchal society to be a man is to be the norm, it is to be objective, to be nonaligned, unbiased, while to be a woman is to have to continually justify one’s being and perspective. She provides particularly pungent examples of this from Aristotle’s definition of female by virtue of “lack of qualities” to the biblical story of Genesis where Eve is, contortedly, born of Adam’s superfluous bone.⁷

Simone de Beauvoir recognises that traditional philosophy, while claiming to conduct singular investigations on human experience, has in reality often conducted ones on the “human and male” experience. In an attempt to correct this, she highlights the experience of women. However, in doing so she fails in extending the recognition of false neutrality to elements of her own identity which are commonly falsely considered neutral as well (such as heterosexual or white).

While “The Second Sex” does mention the oppressive forces black people were and are subjected to by making references to segregation in the United States, she does so to draw an analogy between racial and gendered oppression. In analogising the two she is working on the assumption that the oppressive structures while similar are separable and separate, thereby conducting a “gender-only” analysis which, for instance, problematically excludes the unique experience of black women.⁸

Audre Lorde uses the term ‘mythical norm’ to outline the set of identities which have been established as dominant within our societal framework. The ‘mythical norm’, as described by Lorde, includes “white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure”.⁹ While not necessarily exhaustive, I am of the opinion that the ‘mythical norm’ can be used as a rough list to expand de Beauvoir’s recognition of the false neutrality of the male perspective to the perspectives of other dominant identities. The perception of these identities as neutral directly leads to the problem of the “invisible ‘And’” wherein authors fail to recognize the intersectional perspective from which they are writing and claim their investigations to be singular ‘gender-only’ ones rather than compound ‘gender-and’ ones.

The “invisible ‘And’” can be considered a lifeline to works of traditional feminist philosophy to the extent that it saves the content of many authors from the disaggregation fallacy i.e., from having written a text on the real-world experience of a non-existent person of one-dimensional identity. For, according to the “invisible ‘And’”, when someone claims to give a singular account of gender, they are not wrong because it would be wrong to do so, they are wrong because they are not doing so at all. The content of their writing, while mislabelled, is not necessarily incorrect or unsound. Additionally, it is not as if the experiences of women (though varying significantly) are completely estranged from one another; women not directly represented might still, from the margins, find value in the analysis.

In response to any objection on the degree to which this problematic (if it is indeed limited to an issue of labelling) I would like to make clear the central role that neutral forms and their consequence of the “invisible ‘And’” have played in the exclusion of diverse voices in gender discussions. Having a majority of writing be from the dominant perspectives marginalises that of all others, doubly so if it is falsely accepted as providing a general account rather than a specific one. The “invisible ‘And’” stays true to its name on two levels: First the invisibility of the normative identities which cause it, and second, the invisibility constituted by the marginalisation of minority perspective which it perpetrates.

⁷De Beauvoir Simone, *The Second Sex*, London: Lowe and Brydon, 1949, 13-15

⁸Gines T. Katherine: *A Companion to Simone de Beauvoir*, Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 2017

⁹Lorde Audre, *Sister Outsider*, 111

4 **Conclusion**

In closing, a statement of structure “I do A, not A and B” (when discussing social categories) is problematic due to its wrongful and harmful separation of the elements of one’s social identity. Any legitimate analysis of gender is evidently only ever intersectional. Arguably, those who claim otherwise have been deceived by the “invisible ‘And’ ”. The “invisible ‘And’ ” in as much as it highlights the falsely neutral perspectives hidden in traditional feminist theory thus not allowing such investigations to pass as a ‘gender-only’, aids feminist theory to more effectively address women, all of whom possess intersectional identities.

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