

Reading trouble? On a rejected alternative to Kathleen Stock’s immersion-in-a-fiction explanation

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Abstract. This paper responds to Kathleen Stock’s attempt to explain a puzzling fact, at least from her standpoint: widespread assertions that some people who are biologically male are women and some people who are biologically female are men. She regards these assertions as made while immersed in a fiction. Stock rejects an alternative explanation – that a lot of these people have read Judith Butler or 1970s feminism. Clarifying that explanation reveals it to be not so easy to dismiss.

A puzzling fact. In her book *Material Girls*, Kathleen Stock presents a puzzling fact, or at least a puzzling fact given her standpoint, or at least a puzzling fact given the standpoint of the narrator of her book. Here is the fact:

...politicians, celebrities, journalists, officials from major charities and NGOS, senior figures in the police and judiciary, and many ordinary members of the public all tend enthusiastically to repeat the same mantras that trans women are women and trans men are men, either prompted by others or off their own bat.
(2021: 184)

I assume these “mantras” are meant to convey that some people who would be classified as male by biology are women and some people who would be classified as female by biology are men, whatever the relevant grounds for biological classification are: gametes, chromosomes, sperm ducts or their absence, etc. The popular assertion of these “mantras” is a puzzling fact if you

grew up under the impression that the following are uncontroversial definitions: a woman is an adult female human being; a man is an adult male human being. In this paper, I shall consider an explanation of the puzzle that Stock rejects. I argue that when her statement of the rejected explanation is subject to clarification, the explanation is not so easy to dismiss.

Stock's explanation. Here is what Stock says immediately after the material quoted above:

For many of these, it seems unlikely that they've read Judith Butler or 70s radical feminism. I don't think all of them really believe that sex is 'assigned' or that there are literally hundreds of genders. Yet neither do they seem to be going through the motions. Perhaps others are (quite reasonably, as we'll shortly see) wary of deviating from a socially sanctioned script. But still, it seems that a significant number of people who repeat these mantras – both trans and non-trans – are more emotionally involved than this, yet in a way that stops short of full belief. My hypothesis is that many are immersed in a fiction. (2021: 184)

Stock goes on to clarify her hypothesis, specifically the concept it relies on of being immersed in a fiction. I am going to skip past this clarification, because it is a hypothesis she rejects that I wish to take out of the explanatory dustbin.

A rejected explanation. Stock's justification for her hypothesis involves rejecting rival hypotheses, rival explanations for the puzzling fact. One such rival is:

(Read it explanation) "They've read Judith Butler or 70s radical feminism."

This explanation seems unlikely to her.

Interpreting this rejected explanation 1. There is a question of how one interprets the explanation. What exactly does it say? Is it the view that anyone who reads Judith Butler will by

definition be convinced that some males count as women and some females count as men, so there is no need to even say that they were convinced?! If not, then the rejected explanation is, slightly more fully, the following:

(Read it and convinced explanation) Many people in the industries¹ Stock refers to have read Judith Butler and were convinced, or 70s radical feminism and were convinced.

I shall provisionally operate with this interpretation of what the explanation is, before returning to the task of clarifying it later.²

Why reject it? Assumptions or “fieldwork intuitions”? Stock does not tell us why the rejected explanation seems unlikely, or why she thinks it unlikely. That is a gap in the case she makes for her favoured explanation. What fills that gap? Here is a “natural” starting point for filling in the details. She is assuming the existence of at least one of the following obstacles:

(Too difficult obstacle) Most people in the industries referred to would find texts by 1970s feminists or Judith Butler too difficult and so don’t read them.

(Too time consuming obstacle) Most people in the industries referred to do not have time to read these texts and so don’t read them.

But I am not sure whether Stock is actually assuming either of these obstacles. For all I know, she will say, “I have a wealth of experience in a variety of universities in this country and I think I’m pretty reliable now on who has and who hasn’t done some reading. Since switching to the topic of trans-rights, I’ve met a lot of people in these industries and after talking with them I don’t believe they have read Judith Butler or 1970s radical feminism. I didn’t assume there is sure to be one of these obstacles. Maybe the reading is too difficult for them, maybe they don’t

¹ I use “industries” but maybe “fields and the general public” is a more accurate choice – local influence I presume.

² Here is a starting point for defining what it is to be convinced by reading. A person is convinced of a proposition P through reading if and only if: (i) they did not believe P; (ii) they read a text arguing for P; and (iii) this caused them to believe the argument and thus believe P.

have time, maybe there is some other obstacle – I don't know. My actual experience of people led me to the judgment that it's unlikely that they have read these sources, and I haven't got involved in what obstacles, if any, are preventing such reading."

Interpreting this rejected explanation 2. Here, once again, is the interpretation we have been working with of the rejected explanation:

(Read it and convinced explanation) Many people in the industries Stock refers to read Judith Butler and were convinced, or 70s radical feminism and were convinced.

But what about other authors who make relevant claims? There is 1970s radical feminism while Butler's writing from the 1990s became widely read. Is there nothing from the 1980s worth mentioning? "I mean to include that material as well," I anticipate Stock saying. We should probably thus modify our interpretation of the rejected explanation, so that it is now the following:

(Extended read it and convinced explanation) Many people in the industries Stock refers to read 1970s radical feminism and were convinced, or Judith Butler and were convinced, or other sources claiming that females can be men and males can be women and were convinced.

But what is it to claim this? We can distinguish between a demanding answer and a less demanding answer.

(Demanding answer) To claim this is to explicitly say, "Females can be men and males can be women," or make some very similar explicit statement, e.g. "Males can be ladies and females can be gentlemen."

We just add that clarification to our "Extended reading and convinced explanation." It seems to me that this combination is what Stock has in mind. (By the way, "very similar," looks as though

it can be given a precise formulation: some statement conjoining “Males can be W” where W is women or a subset of women, and “Females can be M,” where M is men or a subset of men.) But instead we can use this clarification:

(Less demanding answer) To claim this is either to explicitly say so, for example “Females can be men and males can be women”; OR to explicitly assert a more general thesis which entails the more specific claim.

A worry. The less demanding answer gives rise to a worry, at least from my standpoint. Some of the people in the industries Stock refers to may have read about how a person’s perceptions of nature in general are affected by a history of images they have had contact with (Romantic paintings, idealized images of Victorian gardens, etc.), so their perceptual experiences would be different with a different cultural history; and they then just apply this general thesis to perceptual experiences of the sexes.³ People working in some of these industries may well learn general theses about how cultural traditions of imagery affect perception and then apply them – is that so unlikely?

A neighbouring explanation: patterns. There is also the following:

(The pattern explanation) Many people in the industries Stock refers to are taught to think of A as socially constructed, B as socially constructed, C as socially constructed, and so forth; then they extend the pattern to the sexes, but without necessarily encountering a highly general thesis and applying it.

You are taught the extent to which the information “given” by a certain image, an image of a famine say, can be affected by subtle decisions by the image-makers and by features of viewers’ minds: there is a kind of “construction” going on. And then you are taught this for another

³ The perceptual claim is by no means mad. Thomas Laqueur’s history (1986) invites one to perceive diagrams of the male and female reproductive organs as inversions of one sexual system, with the ovaries as female testes, etc.

image, an ultrasound image of a baby say; and a third image, and so forth.⁴ You are “drilled” to do such analyses. Then you apply that technique of analysis to other topics, including Stock’s topic of discussion.

From my standpoint, there is nothing unlikely about various people in the industries Stock refers to arriving at “unorthodox” gender views by rejecting a myth of the given⁵ in various specific topics, and then extending that pattern of rejection. Is it simply “given” to human beings in perception that there are two sexes? That is where they may well respond with “UNLIKELY!” Extending the pattern leads them to propose that alternative perceptual experiences could lead most members of our society to break with the outlook we grew up with: that there are two main sexes, and that adults of one sex are men, of the other women.

A side note: who reads what? Stock has impressions of who reads what, or at least who is more likely to have read what. Probably many people have such impressions. But in trying to work out who has read what, it is worth keeping in mind the following possibility: that a number of people who are not officially researchers in an institution specialize in their reading. For example, at a university the building attendants, the security, and the administrative staff all read one particular philosopher. So while someone might have the casual impression that a certain academic staff member reads a lot of “highbrow” material and various other non-academic staff members just enjoy lowbrow entertainments, these other members all know more about that one philosopher than almost anyone else in the university! (Note: earlier in this paper, for the sake of simplicity, I overlooked philosopher-made-easy guides, which, rather than make a claim Stock

⁴ My famine example is influenced by Alula Pankhurst: “The Ethiopian famine, as remembered by the world, is largely a fabrication of the visual media projected on a hitherto unheard-of scale.” (1992: 2) I have some difficulty believing this, because I am disposed to trust the images or because I have noticed some other fabrications projected on quite a large scale. My ultrasound example is influenced by Marilyn Strathern 1992: 48. Strathern refers to research done in the 1980s by Rosalind Pollock Petchesky.

⁵ The expression is associated with Wilfrid Sellars, though I am not sure if this is what he has in mind. See Sellars 1997.

reacts to, merely convey it.)

A side note: the evolutionism versus diffusionism debate. There was a debate from British anthropology prior to the revolution carried out by Bronislaw Malinowski and A.R. Radcliffe-Brown roughly (!) a century ago. The debate got swept aside with the revolution, though a desire to bring it back appears from time to time. Anthropologists find feature X in one society and another society, for example belief in magic is widespread in both. How does one explain this? According to Victorian social evolutionism, there is a sequence of evolutionary stages. Societies which are in the same stage will share features corresponding to that stage. (That looks uninformatively true within this framework.) Also one society at a more advanced stage sometimes shares a feature with a society at a less advanced stage, because the more advanced society has a remnant from a previous stage.

According to diffusionism, in its traditional form, within a certain period there is some society which is a centre of creativity; ideas and practices and technology spread (diffuse) from this centre to other societies. The explanation Stock rejects is broadly diffusionist: people in various industries read 1970s feminism or Judith Butler and this affected their beliefs. (To say “It spread from California, *the* centre of creativity in the 1980s and 90s,” would be paradigmatically diffusionist by older standards.) I have not presented Stock’s immersion-in-a-fiction explanation, but it does not seem as if it would reveal a way of overcoming this debate conceived as a debate of two, because it would still leave a question of where the fiction “scripts” came from. Is the convergence with certain academic claims owing to diffusion from universities or are different parts of Western society at the same evolutionary stage, resulting in these same beliefs? She has not uncovered a third way here. (I don’t mean this as a criticism. Stock’s puzzle may interest different researchers for different reasons, some of them arriving from other debates, such as

which claims to take as expressions of belief? – it is this debate which chiefly interests her I think. But it is worth keeping in mind that what would be a significantly novel contribution within one of these debates would not necessarily be so within another.)

Conclusion. Stock is faced with (or is facing!) a puzzle from her standpoint: “We all learnt that women are adult females and men are adult males and yet many people in certain industries deny this, as well as many members of the general public.” And she rejects an explanation: “They’ve read Judith Butler or 70s radical feminism.” In this paper, I have subjected this statement of the explanation to an analysis. Does she mean they have read such material and were convinced? Is she referring to only these texts or other texts as well and if so, which texts? When we try to develop a clearer understanding of the explanation she rejects as unlikely, it does not seem so unlikely any more.

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