

Flowchart girls: Kathleen Stock versus non-negotiable fictions

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Abstract. I consider Kathleen Stock's response to trans-rights claims which appeals to the concept of immersion in a fiction. I propose that some fictional personas, however artificial they seem, are fixed points within a subject's system. That fiction is there come what may.

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"All the ways that two can kiss

—Can you flowchart this?"

In her book on trans-rights, Kathleen Stock writes:

...a significant number of people, whether trans or non-trans, who would endorse – perhaps even very enthusiastically – claims that trans men are 'men' or 'male', and trans women 'women' or 'female' (etc.) are immersed in a fiction when they do so. They have consciously or unconsciously committed themselves to thinking – and even temporarily feeling and acting – as if these things are true, some or most of the time. However, I would argue that they don't think the statements are literally true. (2021: 182)

Stock's approach reminds me of Marilyn Strathern capturing an approach to knowing associated with the English middle class:

They apparently love the literal-minded. Their fantasies are about 'the real world' – only clear away the assumptions and you will get to the truth; only clear away

the constructions and you will get to the facts. (1992: 7)

Here I wish to propose an alternative approach to seemingly fictional personas, fictional personas beings things which one might also try to clear away.

Some fictional personas that people adopt may seem to you to be shams or a kind of armour. They are so artificial. It is tempting to bullishly put pressure on them, till we see the real person. But we can at least conceive of some fictional personas as existing within a system of commitments where they are held come what may (Quine 1951), or have close to that non-negotiable status. If anything has to change, it is something else – it is not that. Or it is better not to see what life is like without that. (I suspect it is a bad idea to put pressure on desperate last resort moves with the hope of producing “Our idea of a proper adult.” If that goes wrong, you’re the failed adult!) The things that have to change can include character dispositions. If someone has character dispositions which do not fit well with the fiction and there is enough pressure, they might decide that what needs to change are these dispositions.

You might encounter strange fictions, such as “I am a Miss Flowchart.” If they are really good at flowcharts, I think I wouldn’t try to get rid of that or force the person to acknowledge that we cannot make a proper flowchart of choices for the situation we face. “I am a Miss Flowchart” is a good choice I think for a near non-negotiable fiction, if one is skilled enough, because there can be still be partial flowcharts in strange situations, and if one of these fictions is to take a central place, let it be one which can cope with quite extreme situations. “So these are the options...”

References

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Strathern, M. 1992. *After nature: English kinship in the late twentieth century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.