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Which Reality? Whose Truth? A Review Kathleen Stock's *Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*

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*Material Girls: Why Reality Matters for Feminism*

Kathleen Stock

Fleet/Little, Brown, 2021

320 pp.

In *Material Girls*, the philosopher Kathleen Stock argues that the categories WOMAN and MAN (capitalized by her to indicate that these are concepts and not the entities they refer to) are not altered by inner feelings of gender identity. Just saying you are a woman or feeling like you are a woman does not put you in the category WOMAN. These categories (and related ones like MOTHER) are rooted in biological sexual dimorphism. For Stock, TRANS WOMEN are not WOMEN. To conflate them is to commit a category mistake.

Of course, this is all on the Platonic heights of CONCEPTS and the biological plane of molecules and cells. What does it mean in the lower case for trans women, men, boys, and girls, that is, for people who have inner lives and thus exist as biographical, and not merely biological, beings? And what does it mean for all of us as the *zoon politikon*, those animals that are each unique and yet can only live together and express their uniqueness with one another? To paraphrase Hannah Arendt, humans, not HUMAN, live on the Earth and inhabit the world.

As a philosopher and a father of a transgender son, I read Stock's book from this angle. I think this is a fair approach. After all, Stock tells us that these ideas matter because of their political implications. In her telling, gender identity theory has recently and rapidly taken society by storm in ways that have important public consequences. Stock is concerned about harms to non-trans women that ensue when gender identity displaces sex as the criterion for demarcating access to women's sports and women's only spaces like locker rooms, bathrooms, shelters, and prisons. She is also critical of how gender identity scrambles both heterosexual and homosexual relationships and how it alters medicine, public health, and criminal justice.

The sub-title of Stock's book is *Why Reality Matters for Feminism*. But *which reality*? Platonic reality is a space of cleanly defined concepts. Biological reality is a space of facts and explanatory theories. Political reality, as the scholar Deborah Stone [argues](#), is a paradox. Moral and political reasoning takes shape as arguments designed to create and resolve paradoxes in particular ways. This entails metaphor, analogy, interpretation, and framing—highlighting this and downplaying that in order to get people to see a situation *as* one thing or another.

What governs how one makes those framing choices? These selections are not deduced formulaically from conceptual analysis. After Stock's philosophy in the clouds of CONCEPTS and the infra-human terrain of chromosomes, we still have trans people in the living flesh. Stock does not deny their existence. Indeed, she says that they “deserve laws and policies that properly protect them from discrimination and violence” (12). These policies can't be as simple as excluding trans women from all women-only spaces. Stock herself notes, for example, that passing trans women should use women's restrooms in order not to

“disrupt the social norm” (213). So, how do we draw the boundaries of political reality, which is more of an entanglement and imbroglio than either conceptual or biological categories would care to admit?

Public policies that shape the social order are a matter of weighing risks, costs, and benefits, which Stock notes albeit without making this as central as I think it is (see page 92). The problem is how, despite her brilliant analytic clarity in other areas, she conflates her own risk calculations with conceptual analysis. She does not theorize, in other words, the relationship between the *polis* and the philosopher. Nothing in her higher-order theoretical work dictates the examples she chooses to illustrate and frame policy problems and arrive at her conclusions about the best balance of benefits and harms. One way to frame the place of philosophy in the *polis* is to ask: What are the uses of theory? It can pick out and define items for our attention. Yet it can also serve as a trojan horse to smuggle in interpretive choices that are grounded in something else.

Political reality is so complex that several reasonable paths are available when it comes to policy. So, it can't be theory or reason alone that guides us. Again, what is governing those choices for her? She leaves this unexamined. The question I am asking is about what Heidegger called ‘mood’ or the feeling tone out of which we encounter reality—that which establishes the reality that *matters* for us. Mood is our orientation toward a subject, enabling the preconditions for meaning.

As I'll show, Stock's mood is dark and fearful. Again, this feeling tone is not a logical consequence of her or anyone else's theory. I can say this confidently, because I agree with many of her conceptual points. For example, I think she is right to dispense with both social-constructivism and biological determinism. I also find much to like in her own preferred “identification model” of gender as well as in her theoretical work more generally, which offers much to foster self-reflection on this vital topic.

And yet my orientation to this subject is so vastly different from hers. I am immersed in the long emergency of being a trans-inclusive family in Texas where anti-trans bills are legion. My wife and I were nearly deemed child abusers by the state. Trans kids have just been barred from playing on their sports teams. More prosaically, but to give a flavor of the pervasive ambience, a public library event titled “Transgender Storytime” was canceled due a campaign of harassment orchestrated by a gubernatorial candidate. The only comprehensive youth transgender healthcare clinic in a 500-mile radius has just been shuttered due to political pressures.

Meanwhile, Stock reports that gender identity has received “uncritical acceptance” in the UK, and she has told personal stories of feeling unsettled by trans women on dating sites. She came to this situation with a far different orientation, concerned about rushed legislative developments in the UK in 2018 that would end female-only spaces for certain legitimate purposes.

Such divergent origins of thinking make communication on this topic profoundly difficult, even in the academy. We—two philosophers—are almost destined to disagree. Will we not deploy our reason in line with our direction of travel? Won't REASON serve as a cloak for deeper, pre-established positions and values commitments?

## The Foreboding Mood: Which Reality?

Stock's mood or disposition is precautionary. She is like environmentalists who see doom around the corner. Only in this case, the limits being breached are not ecological but cultural. They are the "well-established social norms" that she thinks are going to crumble due to the tectonic shifts of gender identity theory and the resulting "seismic policy changes" that are "bound to have detrimental consequences for female safety" (91). In the political reality, this reading of our situation is what drives her normative conclusions about what we should do.

Let's get into her foreboding mood. The "full consequences" of gender identity policies, she writes:

... [W]ill take a while to emerge, partly because well-established social norms take a long time to dismantle. Humans are social animals who often like to follow the lead of others. At the moment, even where a policy explicitly permits access in terms of gender identity not sex, many will be reluctant to make use of it, assuming they even know about it. Others, unaware of the policies, will continue to challenge those of the opposite sex entering a space. Both things help to preserve the genuinely single-sex norm. But this protective effect won't last forever. As more people start to find out about the policies and to access spaces in line with gender identity, displacing the old sex-based convention, it's not hard to see how it will be easy for badly intentioned males to take advantage and so expose females to risk (91).

She admits that this is conjecture, and she concedes that the current sex-based system has "regrettable costs." "However," she writes, harms to trans people need "to be considered alongside the potential costs of effectively allowing any male at all into places where females are unusually vulnerable to sexual assault. On balance, I don't think the former harm outweighs the latter" (93).

This is the heart of the reality that matters, and it is amazing how—after the concepts in *CAPITALS* and the facts about sexual dimorphism—we are left with judgments about balancing harms. Her "I don't think ..." is the thin reed supporting all of her political prescriptions. As I'll show below, at every crucial political juncture, she doesn't think protecting the safety and dignity of transgender people outweighs the "potential costs" of altering the social norm. Stock is most concerned about a teeming horde of violent "transsexual pretenders" who might rush into the nihilistic void created by gender identity policies. Yet the book has no systematic scheme or scale for weighing different harms or assessing the likelihood of such a social collapse. Of course, any such scheme would be shot-through with judgment calls, but at least those could be made in the open. No, her utilitarianism is the invisible ghost in the machine.

At nearly every instance in the book when trans women are mentioned as agents on the world stage (rather than as authors or theorists where they do not pose a potential threat) they are deceivers, rapists, and violent offenders. Stock is quick to point out that she does not believe all trans women are bad. Sure, but she only calls upon the handful of trans

women who will serve as convenient props for her position. In so doing, she casts thousands of others into the background where they cannot ek-sist, as in stand out and be seen. It is in this way that she erases trans people. She does it by giving them all the weight of a feather on one side of a scale with a great tonnage of mostly conjectural male pretenders on the other side of the scale. It strikes me as more like paranoia than a calculation rooted in reality.

Karen White is the transsexual pretender on whom Stock spills the most ink. White was convicted of sexual assault on female prisoners, which Stock uses as her main exhibit in her case for why all transgender women should be excluded from women-only spaces (well, unless sometimes when they pass well-enough to fit Stock's standards of normativity). Which reality matters most in the case of White? Is it, as Stock argues, that White has a penis? Or is it that White was a convicted pedophile on remand for [multiple rapes](#) and other sexual offenses against women? I would say the latter reality matters the most in this case. A targeted policy about isolating these kinds of criminals would be a far more proportionate policy reaction.

This is a motif for Stock: point to a handful of problematic cases and blend them with sexual dimorphism to derive a sweeping trans-exclusionary policy recommendation. The book reads like an academic rehash of the "bathroom bills" debates in 2015 in Texas. Scant evidence was ever found then, or now, about bogeymen lurking in the stalls, but that didn't stop people from taking the occasion to loudly and publicly dehumanize and demonize all transgender people. Was that just a 'regrettable' cost of preventing potential future harms (harms resulting from acts that are already illegal anyway)?

Turning to sports, Stock argues that the differences in physical performance between males and females justify keeping them separate for reasons of fairness and safety. She is more nuanced here, noting the variety of sports policies that are trying to strike a balance around transgender inclusion. She argues that there are a few cases when transgender athletes can play on teams that align with their gender identity. And she tries to handle the tricky fact that many sex-linked performance advantages occur *within* the category FEMALE (e.g., the Caster Semenya case), which destabilizes the category itself.

Yet here again her mood drives her own broadly trans-exclusive cost-benefit assessments. It does so in two ways. First, she once again frames the conversation in speculative terms about a coming wave of transgender athletes soon to dominate everything, spelling "nothing less than the destruction of female sport" (76). This is the precautionary or perhaps paranoid approach: transgender athletes hardly register on podiums today, but they might soon.

Second, she construes "fairness and safety" in narrow terms that discount the experiences of transgender athletes. Stock uses the case of transgender sprinter Andraya Yearwood. She categorizes Yearwood's wins as happening in women's events, but they were high school competitions. It would seem that Stock wants to exclude trans girls from playing on sports teams that align with their gender identity. Youth sports are about so much more than competition, though. 'Fairness' here means something much broader about including children on teams where they can participate in the character-building magic of sports as their authentic selves. And 'safety' means creating societies that allow kids to be who they are across all walks of life.

Once again, Stock needs to check her balances. Are trans girls really so insignificant? Is their exclusion just a ‘regrettable’ cost to pay for ensuring fair competition? If not, if she would insist that this is really about elite events, then we are back to hashing through the existing tangle of policies that already exist. No theory of sexual dimorphism will cut those gordian knots. And it does make you wonder about the much bigger threats to women in sports. The unequal pay. The sexual abuse from cis-gender men. Is Andraya Yearwood really the villain? Finally, the same pattern is repeated on the topic of medical care for transgender youth.

Stock’s frame casts a bright light on ‘detransitioners,’ people who underwent hormonal treatments or surgeries at a young age only to regret them later in life. These are tragic cases, many of which result from failures to follow existing healthcare guidelines, which call for slow, comprehensive, and deliberative approaches to the care of trans youth. Just as we can mitigate harms in women-only spaces and sports through attention to policy details, here too we can mitigate harms to children by ensuring best practices are followed. Of course, as Stock also notes, there is no way to eliminate all risks, which is why we are constantly thrust back into judgments about relative weights.

What Stock casts entirely out of the frame of view are the thousands of children who thrive because comprehensive healthcare is available to them. Worse than that, Stock favors prohibiting crucial elements of that care. She writes, “in my view there are no circumstances in which minors should be making fertility-and health-affecting decisions involving blockers, hormones or surgery” (117). She argues that “No period of therapy prior to the age of majority could be long enough to untangle” all the fluid strands of a developing self. Mind you, this is in her view. But why does her view matter at all here? She knows next to nothing about the fields involved. She has evidently not lived with or spent significant time with trans youth. She lacks the experience and imaginative capacity to fathom what’s going on. She bases her view on her own theory of gender, but it is clearly just one way of interpreting that theory. Again, I like the theory. There is so much room for interpretation in it. She emphasizes the fluidity of the self and favors a precautionary wait-and-see approach. I understand these points, and clearly things can be too rushed in some cases. But there is also a self—at least with some people—that is stable and cries out to be recognized and honored.

Further, there is no risk-free choice in this case either. She makes it sound like waiting for the age of majority is a neutral thing when it is so far from it. She should know this with all her emphasis on biology: puberty introduces major, permanent changes to the body. For some youth, the thought of experiencing the wrong puberty is horrifying. For others who go through it, the efforts to try to undo it are more harmful than the methods for preventing it. This is the problem with her precautionary stance—even as a principle, it does not specify the harms to be prevented. Waiting is also a choice with its own consequences. There are many forks in the road when it comes to the care of maturing trans youth. Who do you want governing those paths? You can have competent, loving professionals working with supportive parents. Or you can have legislators who, like Stock, just can’t possibly see (you know, *from their view*) the full picture. In the latter case, legislators and advocates like Stock close off pathways to authenticity and dignity by mistaking their ignorance, privilege, and bias for prudence. That, at any rate, has been the reality that matters to me.

## **The Controversy: Whose Truth?**

Stock has become a lightning rod in the culture wars and political controversies about gender and free speech. Student protests at the University of Sussex, where Stock worked as a professor, led to an official investigation into transphobia. Many students called for her to be fired, demands that Stock claimed were fueled by hostility from academics. Other academics came to her defense, yet in October, Stock resigned her post due to what she called a “medieval experience” of “witch-hunts and intimidation.” In a BBC [interview](#) shortly after her resignation, Stock described a campus plastered in posters targeting her. She recalls running from campus back to the train, hyperventilating from the trauma. As Stock noted in the interview, this is all ‘tricky,’ because it is about speech and language. The students, she said, are using speech “to intimidate me” and Stock is using speech “to say things they don’t like.” Those turns of phrase, though, once again hide her interpretations behind a purported neutral framing. She is being ‘intimidated’ but the students are just being confronted with ideas “they don’t like.” But what is the difference here? Perhaps it is a matter of mood, of how reality discloses itself.

Earlier in the interview, Stock echoes an argument in her book to the effect that trans people are not really unsafe. She tells students that “whether you feel unsafe or are unsafe is two different things.” The philosopher is supposed to distinguish appearance from reality, after all. She goes on to say that if someone could offer a “credible argument following a chain of reasoning” that she was ‘literally’ putting people in harm’s way, then she would care about it. Yet did she apply this same high standard to herself hyperventilating back at the train station? Was she just feeling unsafe or was she really, literally, unsafe? Did she resign as a result of a chain of reasoning that proved she was no longer safe? And can we even imagine a chain of reasoning that would really change her mind about the impacts of her ideas or about the meaning of her experience at the train station? Wouldn’t there be ample opportunity along that chain to inflect things this way or that depending on one’s mood?

Stock thinks that to support trans people is to be “immersed in a fiction,” because no one has literally (in reality?) changed their sex. (Of course, Stock could be accused of immersing us in her own ‘fiction’ where trans people are the threat.) Stock is concerned that many academics have abandoned the quest for truth in favor of uncritically propping up this fiction or out of fear that they will get caught in the crosshairs of a censorious cancel culture. More than that, she is worried that people across society are being “coerced into this immersion” in ways that undermine their rights to free speech.

Shortly after that BBC interview, Stock announced that she was ‘delighted’ to be joining the new University of Austin (UATX) as a Founding Faculty Fellow. UATX boldly proclaims to be resurrecting the core mission of the university: the ‘fearless’ and “unfettered pursuit of truth.” In the interview, Stock states in exasperation that she thought that was the job of the academic and the philosopher. We are after the truth, aren’t we?

Yes, but which truth? I am with Stock on this with her critiques of social constructivism—as if there was no truth of the matter about climate change, the efficacy of vaccines, or the shape of the Earth?! Sign me up for the unfettered pursuit of truth if it means getting the important facts straight. There is far too much misinformation out there. But flat-earthers are just plain wrong. They are not immersed in a ‘fiction’ like Stock is talking about. I think

she is right to call gender “a mysterious thing” in the first line of her book. It is like a fiction, if that means a story that we get pulled into and find our deeper selves. Great works of fiction, like other forms of art, have the capacity to disclose deeper layers of reality and help truth shine.

The truths we are talking about here are the kind that happen when something “rings true” in your soul. They are the “true colors” of authenticity that Cyndi Lauper sings about. The fearless pursuit of these truths is precisely the transgender experience that Stock so cavalierly ignores and discounts at every turn in her book.

It is telling that Stock, a lesbian, is not actually moving to Texas, a state that regularly debates the basic rights of LGBTQ people. Rather, she is “just getting involved in various ways from a UK base.” UATX promises to be the new bastion for people fighting for their right to say whatever they want, however they want, whenever they want. Limits are tyranny. The pursuit must be ‘unfettered.’ They claim this is in response to the current failings of the university. As if the mission of such a noble institution could be boiled down to one, bullheaded drive—one blaring note in a single key from the fearless lone trumpeter in the band. Indeed, that is the very kind of reductive, tone-deaf dogmatism we are supposed to help students and society move past as we think through complexities, nuances, and perspectives. Sure, pursue the truth. Which truth? Whose truth? How to do it? What about *listening* to the truth from nature or from other people? How about finding common ground or thinking about how the quest *toward* truth is also a journey *from* self-evident or axiomatic truths?

Gender is a mystery, but it is not ours to solve. It’s not that kind of mystery. That’s Stock’s basic misunderstanding by my lights. Picturing gender her way is how the “unfettered pursuit of truth” decays into bans on changing birth certificates and even required genital inspections to make sure people are on the right teams and in the right places. It’s how the invasion of privacy gets justified. It’s how trans-inclusive families like mine have to constantly divulge and defend ourselves. These pursuers of truth demand of us, screaming: We must know who you *really* are!

The trope of appearance and reality continually emerges across the book and the controversy. At one point, Stock argues that non-passing trans women create a jarring perceptual experience that slows down the cognitive processes of women in ways that might make them vulnerable to assault (176). She wants people to look and act the part. Sometimes, that is, she wants trans people to *pass* even though by her definition this is hiding the ‘truth’ or perhaps TRUTH behind an appearance.

Yet elsewhere, she focuses on people who are deceived into an attraction to someone who is not the sex that it would appear. The cover of *Material Girls* features a picture of a young white woman with a satin band of pink flowers pulled over her eyes. So, other parts of Stock’s book are about being blinded to truths about sex and the deceptions that result. It seems like Stock wants trans people to either blend in or stand out depending on what would help non-trans people *feel safe*. Is this what it means to not disrupt the social norm? Early in the book, Stock writes, “I am critical of gender identity theory—but not of trans people, for whom I have friendly sympathy and respect” (13). Really? Later, she writes, “As a

trans person, having your preferred pronouns or other sex-incongruent terms used by others is a courtesy on their part and not a right on yours” (178). Imagine Stock is sitting down to lunch with a transgender person, for whom she has “friendly sympathy,” of course. Then, someone walks up and starts mis-gendering her lunchmate. Stock thinks it is more important to defend their freedom to be a jerk than to defend someone’s basic dignity. That’s the right cost-benefit analysis? And she wonders why people keep calling her transphobic.