

Trans-rights debates, social construction of the “sexions,” and analytic philosophy

Merely evaluative. Kathleen Stock has intervened in debates on trans-rights as a representative of the analytic tradition in philosophy. But with how she pursues the task, the influence of the analytic tradition is almost entirely reduced to tidy evaluation, which will dissatisfy some.

Post-whomans? The obvious corrective is to draw attention to how W.V. Quine’s vision feeds into trans-rights research. (Is where he is referred to not known? I suspect certain gambles in this research area are influenced by Quine. One uncovers an alternative way of coping with some evidence, then gambles on its being an equally good rival theory.)

Where to revise. Probably don’t tamper much with chapter 1’s history. Here is a proposal for introducing more analytic philosophy: in chapter 2, revise the sections on the claim that the sexes are socially constructed. Stock “organizes matter” by author – section one on Butler, section two on Laqueur, section three on Wittig – but focus instead on kinds of argument. Below are some.

1. Under-determinism arguments. According to Stock’s sex enumeration theory, there are two main sexes. These arguments say that there is or could be a rival theory which also copes with the relevant evidence. (There are various routes to this conclusion, some of which are clearly Quinean, though perhaps not the route of most interest in this context: T. Laqueur’s I think.)

2. Reflective equilibrium arguments. Two sex theory copes with some of the evidence but sets aside other data. (“Reflective equilibrium” is reached like this.) “Rival theories also brush aside some data; and no one theory’s brush asides are the best, or most natural.” (M. Wittig?)

3. Performative language arguments. When a priest says, “I hereby declare you husband and wife,” or whichever words are used in the perfect example ceremony, they (partly) do not represent pre-existing features of reality, but bring ones into existence. The statement makes one person in the ceremony a husband and the other a wife. Similarly, “I promise to write,” brings into existence a promise; and “It’s a girl” in the appropriate context makes the person a girl, rather than representing a pre-existing femaleness, or so this kind of argument maintains.

4. Verificationist arguments. “How can I verify that my perceptual experiences of different sexes correspond to reality? There is no way. In which case, I do not posit any material cause of perceptual experiences. And collectively we can somehow change our experiences from that of two sexes.” (It seems with J. Butler there are performative language and verificationist strands in her work – some reassuringly familiar analytic terminology! At this public intellectual level Stock occupies, it seems better to disentangle the two and let sophisticates complain.)

5. Incoherence arguments. These arguments aim to show that the commitments of a certain contributor, or set of contributors, which involve denying that the sexes are socially constructed, cannot be consistently maintained. For example, whatever leads some people to say that gender norms cannot be discovered should lead them to say that two main sexes cannot be discovered.

Reference. Stock, K. 2021. *Material Girls*. London: Fleet.