

Reply to Kathleen Stock's tweeted query as to why I did not include her recent article in the Daily Nous Heap of Links

Justin Weinberg, April 22, 2019

Hi Kathleen. Thanks for your patience. Here's my reply. Please be aware that I probably will not be able to engage in much back and forth on this matter, owing to other pressing work.

First, let me note that it was many hours after my initial response to you that I saw your whole thread, and the particular tweet in which you ask whether I consider you "too stupid or malicious" feature on Daily Nous.

I'm not sure you were expecting an answer to this part of the thread (maybe you were) but I do think it's important. So, do I think you're stupid? No. Of course not.

Do I think you're malicious? Well, I don't know you. All I've got is your writings and your tweets to go on. As someone who's sometimes quite surprised at the conclusions people think they can draw about me on the basis of what's publicly available, I understand this is slender evidence.

While you have interacted online with folks in ways I wouldn't (I'm somewhat old fashioned in this regard), it's also true that your situation is, in a number of respects, different from mine. We have both been targets of aggression and outrage, but I suspect you've had the worse of it—not just because of what you've been pushing for, but also, of course, because you're a woman.

Still, I think it's important for people to not let those whose behavior they object to provoke them into engaging in that objectionable behavior themselves. But not everyone shares that view.

The screenshot shows a Twitter thread from Kathleen Stock (@Docstock). The main tweet is a reply to @DailyNousEditor, asking why an article on gender differences wasn't included in the 'Heap of Links'. The article title is "Ignoring Differences Between Men and Women is the Wrong Way to ...". The tweet has 150 retweets and 462 likes. Below it are several replies from Kathleen Stock herself, discussing the article's content, her editorial policy, and her response to criticism. One reply includes a quote from Ray Brassington: "leo that en... ed to reali; ; women -- about bodies, 't nism rests on a si nce" -- Ray Brassington gage critically with". The thread ends with a reply from a colleague in the philosophy profession who wrote to Justin Weinberg to ask him to link to the article.

And personalities and situations and strategies vary, so I'm going to refrain from making judgments about your character.

With that out of the way, let's turn to the question of why I didn't include a link to your piece in the Heap of Links. One thing to note is that *many* items that might seem like plausible candidates for the Heap also go unlinked to. So your piece is not unique in this regard.

Furthermore, no one's entitled to a link. I use my judgment about what's interesting or good or helpful or amusing to make selections among things I find or that are suggested to me by readers. I'm sure some readers occasionally think I've included material I ought not to have, or excluded material I ought not to have. People disagree. I'm okay with that.

As you correctly note in one of your tweets, my linking to articles does not imply endorsement. But it does usually imply, among other things, "I think this is worth reading." A well-argued essay in favor of a view I disagree with could of course be worth reading.

Why didn't I link to your piece, then? I was hoping to. I find the philosophical and practical questions that arise in thinking about sex, gender, and trans persons extraordinarily fascinating. (Of course, this is not to reduce trans persons to mere objects of philosophical fascination.)

Besides being super interesting, though, these questions are highly contentious, owing to the fact that they combine intimate and highly emotional aspects of our selves and relationships, with legal and political decisions, in ways that portend significant changes to important parts of our lives.

These questions are also asked against a background of discrimination, misogyny, and violence that affects all of the interested parties. In

light of that, I think it is reasonable to be cautious about the effects of one's discussions of these questions, particularly in regards to the attitudes and beliefs prompted by them.

Contrast a dispute over the ethics of gay marriage with a dispute over the ontology of numbers. While these disputes may be similar in that they have much at stake philosophically, they differ over their practical import: not just in what might follow from their outcomes but in what it is like for different types of persons to take part in them, or hear other people engaging in them.

When we discuss questions about trans persons, we're discussing personally important and socially salient aspects of the identity of vulnerable people. We don't need to engage in hyperbolic language about, say, "erasing people" or "denying existence" to acknowledge, in a humane way, that we should proceed with caution. So that is an additional factor for me to take into account, alongside interestingness, etc.

I didn't link to your piece because, in my view, it wasn't cautious. It contained questionable moves, some of which I will detail below, and also contained some passages that struck me as gratuitously obnoxious.

As you know, I did not publicize my opinion of your piece or my specific concerns about it. Alex Byrne had emailed me suggesting I post a link to your piece, and I emailed him back explaining some of my problems with it. (I normally don't explain my decisions to link or not, but it was a useful exercise for me to write down my thoughts on this matter.) Alex then apparently shared my remarks with you. If he passed along to you my whole email, none of the criticisms that follow will come as a surprise.

I mention the genesis of my critical remarks just to point out to your followers that I did not seek out

the opportunity to engage with you publicly on this topic. I've learned about the topic somewhat because I'm interested in it and because I thought that editing Daily Nous responsibly required knowing more about it, as it has been coming up with increasing frequency. But I'm not an expert. This lack of expertise makes me somewhat reticent to engage.

Furthermore, I'm not a woman, and I'm not trans. I'm a cis hetero white guy. I totally get why those who have more of a personal stake in this debate are not especially interested in hearing more from people like me about it. In a couple of ways, I'm epistemically disadvantaged here, and that informs my reticence.

An additional matter is the time it takes to engage responsibly on this subject. The topic is one that is very personal to some people, and it is no surprise that it provokes heated discussion. When that heated discussion takes place on Daily Nous, responsible moderation can take an extraordinary amount of time, and I don't always have that to spare. I have the same professional duties typical of other professors, plus the already significant time commitment of running DN, plus familial responsibilities. I am sure my response here will provoke critical feedback (not to mention personal insults), but I predict most of that will go unanswered—again, owing to time.

So let's get down to it then. Below are some of my objections to your essay.

1. Scaremongering and inaccuracy regarding the collection of statistics about sex, part 1.

You write: “The main problem with sex eliminationism is that, in a nutshell, it leaves us with no adequate language to describe a politically important feature of material reality. For a range of purposes, academics and statisticians need to track actual facts about sex, as it operates across various

social groups, practices and discourses. The elimination of talk of sex hampers that.”

The suggestion is that there is a popular movement to stop academics and statisticians from tracking facts about sex, but there isn't. At best, this is a fringe view, and as you yourself say, we should stop “taking the most radicalized possible example of the opposition as representative.”

Your example of this is the Scottish Census. You write, “current proposals to base data about the numbers of males and females in the Scottish 2021 Census directly on the basis of the individual self-identification of respondents, and even to introduce a third “non-binary” option, risk corrupting what is normally a major source of research data for academics and policy-makers about sex and related matters.”

This is misleading. The sex question on the census will actually remain put in binary terms. An extra question has been proposed to allow people to identify as transgender or non-binary, but this would be an *additional* question the answering of which would be voluntary.

2. Scaremongering and inaccuracy regarding the collection of statistics about sex, part 2.

In a part of your essay where you voice concerns about the collection of data about sex you note that “Guidance offered by the UK Crown Prosecution Service, and apparently currently followed by UK police and the court system, advises that ‘all relevant papers regarding prosecutions involving victims... or defendants make reference to the correct presented gender status.’” The rhetorical implication is that the police and court are no longer gathering data about sex. This implication is false, as the very document to which your essay links makes clear. The document provides guidance on how to address transgender persons in the legal system, but also stresses the need for

accurate data about transgender persons (“as much information as possible”).

3. Scaremongering and inaccuracy regarding the collection of statistics about sex, part 3.

In the same section, regarding “practices regarding the statistical tracking of crime,” you write that “Lobbying organizations such as GLAAD advise the U.S. media to report crimes by trans people in a manner consonant with the criminals’ and victims’ preferred self-identification. This practice thwarts the reasonable aim of getting a clear statistical picture of certain types of crime according to sex category, both in terms of perpetrators and victims.” But the second sentence of this quote would only be true if crime statistics were gathered by tracking what various media outlets say. That is not how crime statistics are gathered. (Not only that, the passage seems to suggest that one could otherwise get a “clear statistical picture of certain types of crime” by watching the news or reading the paper, and that is almost certainly not true.)

4. Scaremongering with unsupported claims about violence, part 1.

Your discussion of the need for “protection for females” suggests to readers that trans women pose a violent threat to other women. You of course know that more than a few cases are needed to support this as a generalization, but the evidence does not appear to be there. You yourself note that the studies about such concerns do not support such a generalization.

5. Scaremongering with unsupported claims about violence, part 2.

In another part of your essay you refer to “background facts regarding statistical male violence patterns,” implying that such patterns are what’s relevant to assessing whether trans women

pose a threat to other women. But we have good reason to believe that the facts regarding statistical male violence are not representative of the facts regarding violence by transwomen—that there are relevant differences between the larger population and the much smaller “subset” such that we should be skeptical of assuming that statistics about some of the behavior of one match up with that of the other. Ignoring those differences is to engage in a variation of guilt by association.

6. Misleading picture of “Self-ID”

Left unclarified, the term “Self-ID”, when used in the context of gender identification, is ambiguous. It gives the impression that under a policy of Self-ID, changing one’s gender is as easy as, for example, merely saying “Hey folks I’m a woman now.” Yet, to my knowledge, no government that employs the Self-ID standard conceives of it in that way, and that model of it is not widely supported among those in favor of Self-ID. Self-ID removes certain constraints and bureaucratic hurdles, but as practiced it is still a legal process involving legal officials in an official setting (like court), under oath, with punishments for deception and abuse of the system. You don’t make this clear, and in fact falsely suggest that Self-ID is not compatible with seeking “proof of strong commitment from the applicants”, and so take advantage of the misleading impression the term “Self-ID” gives people in order to raise fears about it.

7. Uneven treatment of the fact that people have reasons for their actions.

You criticize trans women for appearing in stereotypically feminine ways instead of challenging those stereotypes, without acknowledging that a reason often cited for them doing so is avoiding problematic, uncomfortable, or even violent encounters with others who’d otherwise give them trouble.

At the same time, you acknowledge that you and others who share your views may “refuse to use the preferred pronouns or category-nouns of trans people.” This is often taken to be quite rude or insulting behavior. You excuse this behavior, though, by noting that “most don’t do it to be insulting. Rather, they do so as an expression of their allegiance to a philosophical position.”

On your view, then, the fact that those who insist on insultingly calling trans women “he” have a reason for doing so is taken as exculpatory, while the fact that trans women who dress themselves in a way some people don’t like have a reason for doing so is not exculpatory. Why the uneven treatment?

(To push further on this, why give an easier time to direct interpersonal rudeness than to a self-regarding choice that has an infinitesimal chance of making an infinitesimal difference to the lives of others?)

8. Obnoxiousness

This is perhaps more a matter of personal preference than the other points, but there is something about the last part of the essay, in which you basically say, “we all know sex change is a fiction; we just talk that way to humor you people,” that comes off, to my ears at least, as so aggressively obnoxious. Worse, it’s obnoxiousness aimed at a vulnerable population (even if also coming from a representative of a vulnerable population). Despite this article’s purported goal of finding common ground, some of its moves, and its style, left me thinking that was just window dressing.

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While those aren’t all of my reasons for not linking to your post, they are most of them, laid out in a way I hope is clear and reasonable.

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A last note:

For those of you besides Kathleen that have read this far, let me say that I do not plan on providing such a detailed explanation of my linking decisions in the future, so don’t take this as a precedent.

I provided such an explanation this time because public discussions of this topic are especially acrimonious. My decision to not link to Kathleen was being framed as a merely partisan decision. I hope the foregoing has gone some way to showing that I engaged with her essay in good faith and reasonably found it significantly wanting.