

## **Material Girls: Why reality matters for feminism**

Kathleen Stock, 2021. London: Fleet.

As a psychosocial nurse I have worked with young adults who question their gender identity, those who wish to transition to a different gender, and those who have done so with hormones and surgery, some with profound regrets. As a trainee therapist I expect I will see these concerns in some of my clients. I approached this book with a hope to find some insight into how I could support those who cannot bear to be in their own bodies.

Kathleen Stock is a philosophy academic who resigned from her post at the University of Sussex following a student-led campaign against her on the grounds of transphobia. She has been explicit in her journalism and in her book *Material Girls* about the importance of protecting the rights of trans people to live free from fear and discrimination, but she opposes the right to self-identification, a matter that was brought to prominence with the recent proposed changes to the Gender Recognition Certificate. In *Material Girls*, Stock sets out what she sees as the problem: that self-identification implies a solipsistic universe where only one's own perspective is considered.

The book criticises gender identity theory on the grounds of what Stock asserts is its intellectual incoherence and its harmful practices, to trans and non-trans people alike. Stock also argues for the importance of legally recognising biological sex, to protect those who suffer from discrimination because of their sex. Language is slippery: one of the helpful things about this book is that Stock takes a forensic lens to the terms being weaponised in the gender wars and scrutinises what we mean, by, for example, 'gender'. She argues that just this word is used as if it has a singular meaning, but she argues that four different meanings are imposed on the word and wielded according to the speaker's intentions. Just this breakdown alone of what we are saying is enough to make the point that in the passionate arguments for people's freedom to live as they choose and have bodies that do not cause them terrible suffering, amidst all this, we need to know what we are saying when our interventions to help trans people make irreversible changes to body parts and fertility.

Stock draws a timeline of what she sees as eight pivotal moments in the development of cultural attitudes to gender, which she sees as lying beneath the current ideology of gender identity theory. From feminism in the Sixties when Judith Butler separated gender from biological necessity, through Stoller's Seventies concept of gender identity to Butler in the Nineties saying gender is performed and Julia Serrano in the 2000s saying gender is what you feel inside. Stock performs a piece-by-piece dismantling of Butler's theory that language constitutes and produces reality. Her point is that Butler has departed from the social constructionism which does not

deny the physical reality of things, rather says that there is also a social reality. Stock attacks Butler's argument that sex is only socially constructed by arguing that this is logically tantamount to saying that all biological processes are imagined and not real. More widely in this book, Stock is passionately arguing for adherence to "the standard academic norms for knowledge production" (p229). She attacks the Marxist idea of standpoint epistemology as one that silences those who do not share the social situation under discussion.

Stock describes interactions on social media sites such as Twitter where supporters and critics of gender identity theory attack each other from entrenched positions. One of the focal points is the contention that trans activism is perpetuating homophobia in the sterilisation of gay men, through their surgical castration in transitioning, and in the attacks on lesbians who choose only to have sex with natal women.

Stock summarises the current social media culture about self-identification as a war between the radical and gender-critical feminists in one camp and the trans activists and Third Wave feminists (following Judith Butler) in the other camp. Stock herself argues for a more non-binary position, for the importance of recognising nuance and moving away from straw men and ad hominem attacks on the other, which she fairly describes as happening in both camps. On the issue of pronouns, for example, Stock disagrees with the radical feminists who believe pronouns must only reflect biological sex. She briefly refers to what sound like interesting arguments about self-identification from an academic philosophers' position, but with a tone of great urgency she devotes many pages to the practical matters of women's health, women's sports, women's place in history and children's safeguarding to the question of how far self-identified gender can be accepted by others.

Stock includes in the book her concerns about the psychotherapy practised at the Tavistock's Gender Identity Development Service by some clinicians there, who took a stance of affirming the patient's choice of gender from the outset, seeing this kind of validation as the bedrock of the therapy. Stock notes that affirmative therapy started in the United States, where she argues it started as a political rather than clinical movement, created in response to Trump's removal of legal recognition and healthcare protection for trans people. She questions its usefulness in the UK where no such legal and healthcare restrictions exist. Stock argues that such a hostile world as Trump's United States has produced a type of therapy which offers a protective carapace for the trans person, a safe space where they can explore their identity without fear of stigma or hatred from the other.

Our attempts to live with our bodies are open to the modification technology can offer, specifically regarding gender. Stock's book seems to be driven by a fear of what these body modifications can do to children. She argues

that in some cases it is homophobia and misogyny that is causing the huge rise of adolescent girls taking puberty blocking hormones, cross-sex hormones and gender reassignment surgery.

What Stock's book does most usefully, I think, is foreground the suffering of the individual who questions their gender; she asks us to look at our society and our epistemology to see how we can respond more thoughtfully to these individuals. Thought needs to be embraced above action, seems to be the overriding message of her book.

**Sarah Miell**

## **The Limits of My Language: Meditations on depression**

Eva Meijer, 2021. London: Pushkin Press.

Little did I know how an impulse purchase in Schiphol airport in early 2020 would become a source of solace and comfort as I mourned my father – I was returning home from his funeral – and dealt with lockdown after lockdown. Eva Meijer's *The Limits of My Language* is a wonderful literary exploration of the complex and often limited nature of language. Meijer draws on her own experiences of depression and those of others to explore the complex relationship between language and mental illness. She looks at how language shapes us, allowing and limiting us to fully capture the experience of depression and our understanding of the world.

Together we embarked on a journey, delving into the various aspects of language and philosophy. Many an existentialist make an appearance as she explores the richness and shortcomings of language to capture the nuances of the human experience. Nietzsche and Heidegger, who both make an appearance, underscore the boundaries of language in their work. Heidegger went so far as to say that we dwell in language, a depiction I find irresistible, as it is the only way we can understand ourselves and world. Without it, we fail to understand who we are.

Meijer compelled me to think how language impacts my perception of the world and my interactions with others. She showed how it can fall short as a tool to describe our inner experiences, often resulting in feelings of misunderstanding and isolation. She made me look beyond words to other forms of expression, such as art, music and body language. She also recognised that these experiences are shaped by a complex web of social and cultural factors, and that language itself is intertwined in this intricate web:

*You are rooted in a social context that you take for granted—even when it involves a lot of friction. You chat to a colleague, make jokes with your neighbour... All these interactions form a layer around you that shields you from loneliness, and by that I don't*