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Ontology and Oppression

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Reply to Comments by Bettcher, Khalidi, and Russell on *Ontology and Oppression*

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Abstract

This paper replies to comments on *Ontology and Oppression: Race, Gender, and Social Reality* given by Talia Mae Bettcher, Muhammad Ali Khalidi, and Camisha Russell. In response to Bettcher, it discusses the relationship between those approaches to social ontology that focus primarily on explanatory kinds and those that focus primarily on ordinary discourse, and the choice of terms to refer to gender kinds. In response to Khalidi, it discusses pluralism and hybridism about social kinds, the applicability of ontic injustice to social kinds that are not represented, and the role of values in investigating social kinds. In response to Russell, it discusses the individual and collective dimensions of identity claims about race and gender, and the relationship between the more applied and more abstract portions of *Ontology and Oppression*.

Keywords: gender, race, social kinds, social ontology, transphobia

My most sincere thanks to Talia Mae Bettcher, Muhammad Ali Khalidi, and Camisha Russell for their generous, insightful, and thought-provoking comments. It's an honor to have received their responses to my book, and I've enjoyed thinking through the different issues they each raise. Many of these issues call for further thought and discussion, so my replies here will of necessity be incomplete, but I hope they will contribute to a continuing conversation. Although some of the issues raised by different critics overlap, I will consider each set of comments in turn.

Reply to Bettcher

Bettcher raises a number of extremely interesting questions centered on the relationship between ordinary discourse and social kinds. It is clear from the discussion that she favors an approach to social ontology that is much more closely focused than my own on the ways in which ordinary speakers use words. There are important differences between our approaches, and I think it is instructive to reflect on them. That said, I don't see my own work as assuming a separation between

semantics and ontology, as Bettcher (2025, 1) thinks it does. So I'll begin by saying a bit more about how I see my own approach working in this regard.

Roughly, I sought to identify the kinds, or groupings of things in the world, that can feature in the sorts of successful projects of explanation, prediction, and intervention that feminists and antiracists need to carry out.¹ I take these kinds to be based on the patterns and regularities in people's social possibilities (understood in terms of constraints and enablements) that arise from social practices. It is these patterns and regularities that enable certain groupings to be useful for explaining what has happened, predicting what will happen, and structuring interventions to make things go the way we want them to. This isn't totally divorced from the question of how people in different communities use words, partly because people in communities also use words to track patterns, and partly because the use of words is one element of the social practices that produce the regularities and patterns in the first place. But at the same time, these patterns and regularities can diverge from the way words are being applied to people.

For example, suppose that speakers in a certain community tend to apply the term "woman" to anyone who meets a certain set of criteria, criteria XYZ. Suppose further that there is a group of people, group G, who are regularly treated differently from others in ways that structure the possibilities of their social lives according to a distinctive pattern that explains many of the outcomes and dynamics that feminists have historically been concerned with when investigating the oppression of women. Now suppose that group G includes most, but not all, of the people who meet criteria XYZ and also includes some people who do *not* meet XYZ. My approach seeks to be attuned to this possible divergence. It would identify G, rather than the set of people who meet XYZ, as the kind that feminists most urgently need to attend to in this situation in order to understand and resist the oppression that concerns them.

Now, one *could* make the further claim that because kind G has this significance, when people in the community in question say "woman," they are in fact talking about the members of kind G, not about the set of people who meet XYZ, even if they believe and intend otherwise. But I do not make this further claim. Nor do I deny it. Instead, I remain neutral about the referent of the term "woman" as used by speakers in this community. Settling this question, it seems to me, depends on settling a host of controversial issues about how words come to refer to things, and this is not a task I'm well placed to take on. I also don't claim that anyone (e.g., feminists, members of the community) should come to use "woman" in such a way that it refers

¹ This phrasing (of kinds featuring in explanations) is true to the framing I used in the book; however, following a suggestion from Khalidi, I would now say "the kinds that correspond to categories that can feature in explanations." For more on this, see p. 12 below.

to kind G. That, in my view, rests on a host of practical and evaluative questions that are highly context specific.

To be clear, I think that in *our* world, the relevant practical and evaluative considerations almost always point toward using the term “woman” to refer to those people who describe themselves as women, perhaps with some rare exceptions. (For a discussion I find helpful, see Matthew Cull [2024, 61–126].) But my point here is that such conclusions are verdicts based on the totality of relevant political judgments and cannot be mechanically “read off” my view of social kinds. My hope in taking this approach was that by scoping the terrain in the vicinity of our talk of gender and race to identify relevant explanatory kinds, I would be providing useful resources that could (in a further, future step), be connected up with any one of a range of different accounts of what precisely is going on when we actually talk about gender and race, as well as feeding into deliberations about language reform.

So this is how I understood my project. Turning now to Bettcher’s response to it, I get the sense that she has read me as claiming, explicitly or implicitly, something like the following: that there is one way of doing social ontology that is based on investigating explanatory kinds; that there is another, incompatible way of doing social ontology that is based on investigating the semantics of discursive practices; and that the first way is better than the second way. But I did not intend to say this or anything close to it (and it isn’t in fact what I think). Rather, I simply set out to investigate explanatory kinds as one contribution to a larger project of social ontology. I would certainly not want to foreclose other investigations starting from ordinary discourse or to suggest that they ought not to be conducted using the term “social kinds.” Such investigations are also important and valuable for precisely the reasons that Bettcher highlights; and, as she rightly points out, using the term “social kinds” in this other way is hardly uncommon. I welcome the opportunity to clarify this.

In connection with the supposed clash between the explanatory-kinds approach and the discursive approach, Bettcher considers what she calls “what-questions,” or “w-questions” for short (2025, 9). These are questions such as “What is a woman?” She takes the explanatory kind approach to be unable to answer them, but I think that it can, as I’ll now explain.

Bettcher seems to take w-questions to express something like “When we say ‘woman,’ what are we talking about?” I think that’s a completely reasonable way to understand them. Moreover, I’m happy to grant that the explanatory-kind approach is focused on answering a different question: “What are the kinds (groupings of things in the world) that do the explanatory work that feminist projects require and that have often been framed using terms like ‘woman’ and ‘gender’?” But this seems to me to *also* be a reasonable way to understand w-questions.

In other words, I believe that the way Bettcher phrases w-questions can be disambiguated into (at least) two questions, one of which can be answered by the

discursive approach and the other of which can be answered by the explanatory-kinds approach (and I leave open the possibility that there are other questions in the vicinity that could be answered by other approaches). So I think this issue about w-questions is something of a red herring. Bettcher's discussion of them does show that as social theorists interested in understanding not only how social practices produce explanatory kinds but also how conceptions of those kinds circulate among those engaged in the practices, our work is not done until we have also thought about how language is being used in that community—and, perhaps, how it ought to be used. This is an important point, but it is one that the explanatory-kinds approach can accommodate, and I do not see why it would be a reason to think that we cannot gain useful insights from investigations based on that approach.

To put my overall point another way, there is an important difference between saying, "Here's what I'm going to mean in this book when I say 'social kind'" and saying, "Here's what everyone should mean whenever they say 'social kind.'" I welcome this opportunity to clarify that the approach I took in the book was very much in the former spirit and not the latter. Accordingly, while Bettcher thinks that I owe an account of why the kinds-focused approach to social ontology is superior to the semantics-focused approach to social ontology, I do not believe that I do. This is because I do not think that it *is* superior. It is simply different, and we need both.

Bettcher's comments also give me a very welcome opportunity to revisit an issue that I found particularly tricky as I was writing the book. As a theorist, I have to use *some words or other* to describe kinds such as G. This is not because I'm primarily interested in deciding what words do or should mean; it's just a necessity for communicating. To break my approach down, I'm looking at what roles concepts like *gender* and *woman* play in anti-oppressive theorizing.² Then, I'm asking, "What part(s) of reality can do that work?" I need to be able to talk about those explanatory kinds that I've ended up pointing to, and I have some latitude in deciding how to do this. So the question arises: How should I do it?

An obvious option is to use the terms that align with the concepts I started from, terms such as "woman." This approach works well in many other projects, I think, but it faces two important problems in the present case.

The first problem is that there are more kinds than there are distinct terms. That is to say, one of the main things I take myself to have shown in the book is that the work that those seeking to counter gender oppression ask concepts such as *woman* to do, in the context of emancipatory projects, is simply too varied to be

² I understand theorizing very broadly as practically oriented ways in which we seek to make sense of the world we live in; as such, it's not just something that philosophers or scientists do in ivory towers but something that people in wider communities are also doing all the time, especially when they engage in resistance to oppression.

discharged by any single explanatory kind. Lots of kinds, quite different from one another, have to be recruited to get the job done. So if I were to use the term “woman” to refer to all of the kinds that do some of that explanatory work, I would be using it to refer to many distinct kinds, and this would be confusing and unhelpful.

The second problem, which I think is even more important, is that, as I discuss in the book’s introduction, the work of philosophizing does not happen in a vacuum. I therefore cannot simply stipulate what words are to mean in my book and expect this to remain safely sealed in without risk of spilling over into the wider world. I think it would be a bad thing if, in ordinary discourse, the term “woman” were to be used (even more widely than at present) in a way that excludes (all or some) trans women and/or includes (all or some) trans men and nonbinary people. I therefore have reason to be extremely careful not to use it in that way in my philosophical writing. So, overall, there are two powerful reasons not to use terms such as “woman” to refer to the explanatory kinds I identify in my book.³

Now, Bettcher (2025, 10) takes me to have done exactly that; however, I do not believe that I did. This is not to dismiss her point, because I think it shows that the strategy I tried to enact was not fully successful. But before I address what her critique means for what I should do in the future, let me first describe what I was *attempting* to do in the book.

In order to avoid the problems described above while also signaling the strong link between my investigations and prior feminist explanatory projects that used terms such as “woman,” I constructed specific phrases to refer to the kinds I identified. These phrases indicated both the type of kind it was and the term associated with the concept that most closely matched it (italicized to indicate its status as referring to a concept). For example, I created phrases such as “the hegemonic gender kind *woman*,” “the gender identity kind *woman*,” and so on. I wanted these phrases to read as technical terms, so I was fine with them sounding a bit artificial (in fact, I rather welcomed it). Moreover, I was very careful always to use the full phrase. For instance, even when I was talking about hegemonic kinds for a whole chapter and it would be clear from the context I was talking about hegemonic kinds only, I tried always to say “the hegemonic gender kind *woman*,” rather than, “the kind *woman*” or even just “women.”⁴ I also tried to make sure that this construction was integrally built in rather than tagged on at the end—so, for example, I would say “the hegemonic gender kind *woman*” rather than “*woman*, in the hegemonic kind sense.” I took care in these two respects not only to avoid confusion but also (and more importantly) to make sure

³ Or, at least, not to use them to refer to *many* of those kinds; in the case of identity kinds, the second reason seems not to apply.

⁴ I say “tried” because I intended to do this and believe that I succeeded, but of course it’s possible I made a mistake at some point that I haven’t yet spotted.

that those hostile to trans people could not take things I said about these kinds and quote them out of context (i.e., separately from my pluralist account of explanatory kinds) to make it look as if I was saying them about the category of “woman” in a broad sense, or making a recommendation about how the term “woman” should be used.

Of course, the phrases I chose still *include* words such as “woman.” But I think it can be appropriate to use a phrase that contains a certain word in contexts where it would be inappropriate to use the word by itself. For example, I think it can be appropriate to say of a trans man that he “was assigned female at birth,” whereas it is usually, if not always, inappropriate to say that he “is female.”⁵ (The existence of acronyms such as AFAB attests to the commonly accepted status of such phrases in many contexts.) Similarly (though there is no acronym for this one) it can be appropriate to say of a nonbinary person that they “are often perceived as a woman,” while it would be inappropriate to say that they “are a woman.” I took phrases like “is a member of the hegemonic gender kind *woman*” to function similarly to “was assigned female at birth” and “is often perceived as a woman” in this regard.⁶

This is why I disagree with Bettcher’s interpretation of my work. She writes, “While it seems fine to list G1 as a gender kind (i.e., an explanatory kind that would be useful in explaining the operations of things we call *gender*), it does not seem fine to call it *woman*” (Bettcher 2025, 12). But I do not believe that I *did* call such kinds “woman.” I called them things like “the hegemonic kind *woman*.” Her point is still instructive, however, because the fact that she *took* me to be using the term “woman” in this manner indicates that the way I was using phrases to refer to these kinds did not come across to her clearly. I think this indicates that it also may not come across clearly to others. I consider this a problem for my approach. What is more, I consider it a *philosophical* problem. I don’t think the philosopher’s job ends when we have

⁵ Obviously it would be inappropriate to use even the former phrase in contexts where the information it communicates ought to remain private, e.g. if it was used to “out” someone as trans against their wishes. I’m thinking here only of cases where conveying the relevant information *is* appropriate and the question is what words to use to do that.

⁶ Maybe words like “woman” and “man” work differently from words like “female” and “male” in this regard, such that there is something riskier about “is often perceived as a woman” (and hence about my strategy in the book) compared to “was assigned female at birth.” I can see why this might seem plausible, but I’m not convinced; in my experience there isn’t much to choose between the people who call trans women “men” and the people who call them “males” (and *mutatis mutandis* for other trans people) when it comes to the kind of politics they espouse and the kinds of social arrangements they advocate for.

figured out some kind of abstract claim we want to make; when we clothe that claim in words and send it out into the world, we are also still doing philosophy, and this part of my philosophizing seems to have gone awry. I'm sincerely grateful to Bettcher for pointing this problem out. But what to do about it?

Here, I think I need both more time and a broader sense of how the work is interpreted by other readers before I can know what is for the best. If the clarification offered above changes how the work lands with Bettcher and with others, then it might be fine to stick with the approach in the book, highlighting this clarification as needed. If not, then it seems that I have reason to switch to the strategy Bettcher suggests—namely, retaining the terms “gender kinds” and “race kinds” to refer *collectively* to the kinds I identify in the book, but stopping using longer locutions containing terms such as “woman” to refer to the individual kinds. I could then use something like the alternative phrases Bettcher suggests (e.g., “subordinated reproductive class,” [2025, 10]) to refer to these kinds.

There are, in my opinion, some drawbacks to making this change. For one thing, it might seem to grant that there is something else, other than the kinds that I discuss, that is “what gender really is”—and I've not yet seen an argument for thinking this that I find convincing. For another, it might give an impression of greater distance from the theoretical purposes that motivate many uses of gender terms, and an impression of greater separation from other feminist philosophers such as Haslanger and Ásta, whose work has indeed (as Bettcher observes) informed my own in important ways. But for me, these considerations are strongly outweighed by the need to avoid doing harm. If it becomes clear that my current approach risks doing harm in the way Bettcher is concerned about, then I will have a decisive reason to revise the language I use to express my view accordingly.

Finally, Bettcher (2025, 7) raises a third worry: that “[my] elision of the discursive approach . . . leaves [me] unprepared to fully engage with those antitrans advocates who adopt [a strategy based on the discursive approach].” I agree that the resources I offer in the book do not give us a firm basis for engaging with those antitrans advocates who base their arguments on the claim that a trans-exclusionary understanding of the category of *woman* best tracks ordinary language; they were not intended to. This is for a couple of reasons.

For a start, while I think it is important to counter antitrans propaganda, I think it is also important not to let antitrans arguments dictate the terms of engagement for those of us committed to feminism and to trans liberation. Many antitrans arguments are specious, full of basic errors of reasoning, and/or based on reductive understandings of the nature of sex and gender that have already been decisively critiqued. Exposing these flaws is important for political advocacy, but I do not personally find it a very rewarding philosophical project. In writing the book, I wanted to focus on what I see as live philosophical issues—questions that I myself was unsure

how to answer at the outset of the project. If we think that gender is a social kind, exactly *what* kinds are gender kinds? If we think that gender is a product of unjust social arrangements, *how* does this injustice affect, or feature in, the gender kinds themselves? And how does all of this sit alongside the fact that people, including people oppressed on the basis of gender, often experience their gender, or at least aspects of it, in positive ways? If I had been trying to write a field guide to countering antitrans propaganda in its full range of manifestations, I would have written a very different book.

The closest the book comes to offering tools for countering antitrans propaganda is in the final chapter. I hope this chapter is useful for that purpose, but it is also worth noting that it plays quite a specific role in the dialectic of the book. Its purpose is to respond to the charge that my account is inadequate because (a) it doesn't allow us to say that *the only gender kinds (understood as explanatory kinds) that exist are those that align with people's identities*, but (b) we *need* to be able to say this in order to further trans liberatory politics. I tried to show that the worry is unfounded because (b) is false: in fact, strategies that rely on the claim contained in (a) are not necessary for progressing toward trans liberation. Furthermore, they are actually rather risky in that they are prone to generating argumentative difficulties for proponents of trans liberation in the current discursive context. I further try to show that, for this reason, in the very specific social and political context that I find myself in in the UK at the moment, a strategy aligned with the pluralist account I have presented has some significant tactical benefits.

None of this commits me to the claim that we can respond to *all* antitrans advocacy using the apparatus I set out in the book. I agree with Bettcher that my account does not offer resources for directly countering antitrans strategies that lean on a discursive approach to investigating social kinds—or, as she also points out, for countering antitrans strategies that appeal to biological kinds.⁷ But, contra Bettcher, I think my position (based on the explanatory-kinds approach) *does* help in the way I claim it does; it's just that this way is much more limited than she takes it to be. Where I hope we can agree is in thinking that we need many and various strategies to counter the many and contradictory (both between each other and, often, internally within themselves) arguments and rhetorical ploys that are used to try to vindicate trans-exclusionary policies, practices, and worldviews. I would never want to deny this.

⁷ At least, not directly. I do think my account of gender kinds as explanatory kinds may offer some resources for undercutting the appeal of a biological understanding of gender kinds, insofar as those accounts may derive some appeal from claims to explanatory power; but I do not explore this idea in the book and do not have space to discuss it further here.

Recent events in the UK are sadly illustrative of this need for multiple strategies. On April 16, 2025, the UK Supreme Court issued a ruling in the case of *For Women Scotland Ltd v. The Scottish Ministers* ([2025] UKSC 16). The case concerned Scottish legislation, aimed at promoting the representation of women on public boards, that classed trans women with a Gender Recognition Certificate (GRC) as women for this purpose. A GRC is effectively a reissued birth certificate with a different gender marker (e.g., an “F” in the case of a trans woman). Under the legislation that governs GRCs, the Gender Recognition Act 2004 (c. 7), only some trans people can obtain one, and the process to do so is lengthy, costly, and intrusive (for more discussion, see Finlayson, Jenkins, and Worsdale 2018).

The case of *For Women Scotland v. The Scottish Ministers* did not concern the Gender Recognition Act directly, but rather turned on the interpretation of a different piece of legislation, the Equality Act 2010 (c. 15), or EA 2010. The approach taken in the Scottish legislation that was challenged in the case was in accordance with the then-current UK-wide statutory guidance (issued by the Equality and Human Rights Commission [EHRC]) on how the EA 2010 should be interpreted. The Scottish legislation was challenged, however, by a campaign group called For Women Scotland on the grounds that it was incompatible with the EA 2010, correctly interpreted.⁸ It could not be plainer that this is a discursive question. Paragraph 166 of the judgment states: “Our task is to ascertain the meaning of the words ‘sex,’ ‘woman’ and ‘man’ used in the EA 2010, read in their particular context and in light of the wider context and purpose of the anti-discrimination provisions in the EA 2010.” The court ruled that these terms “refer to biological sex” ([2025] UKSC 16, paras. 51, 174).

Of course, for anyone familiar with philosophical literature on biological sex,⁹ this raises more questions than it answers. But the judgment was immediately hailed by all of the UK’s main political parties as providing clarity and a decisive resolution, not just to the dispute about the particular legislation that prompted the case, but to a whole range of different issues. Most devastatingly, the Labour government and the EHRC both appear to have interpreted the ruling as *requiring* that public services such as toilets, changing rooms, and hospital wards be separated according to “biological sex,” understood as the sex originally recorded on a person’s birth certificate (so the

⁸ For Women Scotland is a group that believes trans-inclusive policies and practices constitute “a crisis for women’s rights” (<https://forwomen.scot/>), and that warns that “the very word ‘woman’ will change definition, if the trans lobby succeed” (<https://forwomen.scot/did-you-know/>). Frankly, I think these quotes speak for themselves, but for the avoidance of doubt: I consider For Women Scotland’s stances and rhetoric to be deeply oppressive to trans people, especially trans women, and highly dangerous for cis women as well.

⁹ For a good overview relevant to the present case, see Carter (2022).

change enacted through acquiring a GRC would not count). Perversely, the proposed EHRC guidance also allows for trans people to be excluded from spaces provided for people of their “biological sex.” So, for example, a trans man would not be able to use the men’s toilets in a restaurant because the sex on his original birth certificate is not “male,” but if the restaurant owner judged that, in virtue of the trans man’s appearance and presentation, his presence in the women’s toilets would cause “alarm or distress,” he would not be permitted to use those either. Several legal commentators have suggested that the guidance goes further than the legal decision warrants.¹⁰

This appalling situation could have been averted by applying the kinds of arguments about the meaning of gender terms that Bettcher offers, because that approach would have led to a different judgment being reached by the Supreme Court. That is because this judgment was explicitly a decision about *what terms mean*; the discursive approach is exactly what was needed, and the explanatory-kinds approach would not, I think, have been particularly relevant to influencing the outcome of the legal case.

On the other hand, the perverse guidance, and general overreach in reaction to the legal decision, could potentially have been prevented by a rejection of the ontology-first approach that I criticize in chapter 8 of my book. The amount of commentary taking the judgment to settle the question of what a woman is *in general* was striking. Consider these remarks from the prime minister, Keir Starmer, in the immediate aftermath of the decision:

Asked by ITV West Country if he would repeat that trans women are women, Starmer replied: “I think the supreme court has answered that question.” Pressed on his view, he said: “A woman is an adult female, and the court has made that absolutely clear. I actually welcome the judgment because I think it gives real clarity. It allows those that have got to draw up guidance to be really clear about what that guidance should say. So I think it’s important that we see the judgment for what it is. It’s a welcome step forward. It’s real clarity in an area where we did need clarity. I’m pleased it’s come about. We need to move and

¹⁰ These include the nonprofit organization Good Law Project (<https://goodlawproject.org/case/were-challenging-the-ehrcs-interim-guidance/>) and Lady Hale, a former President of the Supreme Court (see Lucy Knight, “Court Ruling on Legal Definition of a Woman ‘Misinterpreted,’ Lady Hale Says,” *Guardian*, May 22, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/law/2025/may/22/court-ruling-legal-definition-of-a-woman-misinterpreted-lady-hale>).

make sure that we now ensure that all guidance is in the right place according to that judgment.”¹¹

There is a slide here from (a) the actual judgment about the meaning of certain terms in the very specific context of one piece of legislation, to (b) a view on what a woman “is,” to (c) an assumption that this is the right basis for various different types of social arrangements (“all guidance”). This kind of slide would seem natural if one assumed that there is one thing that gender is, and we should make all our different social practices align with that thing—and this is precisely the assumption that I term the “ontology-first approach.” The widespread rejection of this assumption would, I believe, have made this kind of slide less likely. I think this helps illustrate that opposing the ontology-first approach is a worthwhile goal and not, as Bettcher (2025, 6) believes, a red herring.

All of this is to say that having either the belt of a discursive approach argument for a trans-inclusive understanding of the term “woman,” or the braces of a firm rejection of ontology-first thinking,¹² would have helped considerably in avoiding the current mess. But both belt and braces were missing, meaning that the UK’s trousers are now firmly around its ankles and the arse of British transphobia is squarely and excruciatingly on display to the world.

Where can we go from here? One avenue that seems to hold some promise for restoring trans rights is a legal challenge under international human rights law followed by fresh UK legislation. Those drafting such legislation would need to think about which groups of people share needs, entitlements, and vulnerabilities that mean that they should be provided for in specific ways under the legislation. Unlike the Supreme Court, the legislators would not primarily be in the business of working out how a term that was already being used should be interpreted; rather, they would need to work out which groupings of people were relevant to explaining how and why certain harms have occurred, predicting where and when they are likely to occur in future, and intervening to prevent them from occurring. This is what the explanatory-kinds approach does.

As I see it, then, both the discursive approach and the rejection of ontology-first thinking could have played a role in preventing the harms we are currently seeing in the UK, and the explanatory-kinds approach can now play a role in remedying them. I hope this illustrates how the various different parts of mine and of Bettcher’s

¹¹ Peter Walker, “Keir Starmer Welcomes ‘Clarity’ of UK Supreme Court’s Gender Ruling,” *Guardian*, April 22, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2025/apr/22/equalities-minister-bridget-phillipson-welcomes-uk-gender-ruling-supreme-court>.

¹² “Braces” are what North Americans, I am told, call “suspenders.”

approaches can be seen as working together in harmony rather than standing in tension with one another.

Reply to Khalidi

Khalidi raises three very interesting points, and I will respond to each in turn. First, though, I want to acknowledge and adopt a friendly suggestion that Khalidi makes concerning terminology. Khalidi encourages me to be more precise about the language I use to discuss social kinds and their role in explanation. He points out that kinds per se do not do explanatory work—that is rather the role of categories, understood as parts of our discourse. However, in the book I talk about kinds as *doing* explanatory work. I agree with Khalidi’s understanding of kinds as “part of the causal structure of the social world” (2025, 13) or “nodes in causal networks” (Khalidi 2018), so I can see how the language I used in the book was misleading. I will avoid it in future, following Khalidi in holding that kinds don’t *explain* (they just *are*) and that it is in fact *categories corresponding to kinds* that feature in our explanations—where their relation to kinds is the basis for their explanatory power.

The first of Khalidi’s three main points concerns the question of whether a pluralist position can be maintained in the face of the obvious causal interconnections between membership in hegemonic race and gender kinds, in interpersonal race and gender kinds, and in race and gender identity kinds. I’m completely in agreement with the defense of pluralism that Khalidi offers in this context, drawing on an analogy with the concept of species in philosophy of biology. He then presses a further question—namely, why should we be pluralists rather than being “hybridists” (who would conceptualize gender and race as hybrid categories encompassing the various kinds that feature in my pluralist view)?¹³ In other words, why go for “splitting” kinds apart over “lumping” them together?

I have nothing to add to Khalidi’s defense of the benefits of splitting, which I endorse in full.¹⁴ I also agree with him that lumping can have benefits in some contexts, and that this is “a possibility that deserves further consideration” (Khalidi 2025, 8). I’m not in a position to deliver the kind of fully worked out view that such

¹³ Such a view calls to mind the idea that gender is “biopsychosocial,” but I take it that hybridism need not take that particular form.

¹⁴ Indeed, Khalidi’s points about the possible value of splitting in the context of medical research align with advice that I gave, based on my book, to an initiative aimed improving at the integration of sex and gender considerations across data collection, analysis, and reporting in biomedical, health and care research in the UK (see <https://www.messageproject.co.uk/>). The resulting guidance treats each of sex and gender as a cluster of characteristics, and it calls on researchers to specify the characteristics being tracked in any particular study and to justify this choice.

further consideration aims at, but as a preliminary thought, let me share the hope that my pluralist position may be capacious enough to accommodate the tactical use of hybrid categories for some purposes, along the lines Khalidi describes. Perhaps I am now simply carrying the conciliatory tendencies that underpin my pluralism too far, but I would prefer this kind of bridging move over having to make a stark choice between pluralism and hybridism as rival theoretical positions.

One way in which we might think about a reconciliation between pluralism and hybridism is to say that the various different causal processes (that produce distinct groupings with distinctive explanatory value) are like eddies in a flowing river: specific patterns within a larger dynamic. Each of the resulting kinds is unique, but it is also true of each kind that it only exists in the first place because of what is going on more broadly. Maybe pluralism focuses attention on the specific patterns, the eddies, while hybridism looks at the bigger picture, the river. If this way of seeing the relation between hybridism and pluralism can be maintained, then it makes me optimistic for reconciling these two views rather than having to choose between them. Yet I think that gaining further clarity on this requires a clearer sense of what exactly the purposes are for which hybridism is useful. In this spirit, I'm keen to hear more from those attracted to hybridism about what it can do that pluralism cannot.

Khalidi's second point concerns the manifestation of ontic injustice across the tripartite distinction among social kinds that he helpfully makes in his earlier work (Khalidi 2015). These are (1) those social kinds where the kind can exist without being represented; (2) those social kinds where the kind needs to be represented in order to exist, but someone or something can be a member of the kind without being represented as such; and (3) those social kinds where the kind needs to be represented *and* each member of the kind needs to be represented as a kind member. Khalidi asks, in relation to *which* of these types of social kinds can ontic injustice manifest, and are there differences in *how* it manifests?

I want to endorse the suggestion entertained by Khalidi that ontic injustice can manifest in relation to all three types of social kind, and that it can change in character when a social kind that was previously nonrepresented comes to be explicitly represented. As I see it, the claim that ontic injustice can manifest in relation to nonrepresented social kinds is simply a consequence of the definition of ontic injustice combined with the way that I am understanding social construction. Thus, I do indeed need to confront the challenge that Khalidi goes on to pose to this position: if ontic injustice can occur without explicit representation, what, then, is distinctive about it compared to just plain old regular injustice? Take a case, such as the one Khalidi considers, of a society with a class system dividing people into *proletariat* and *bourgeoisie*, but where this system is not represented by anyone. We can surely describe this as a case of injustice; so what is added when we describe it as a case of *ontic* injustice specifically?

My answer to this is, perhaps surprisingly, “nothing much.” This is to say that I do think that such a situation is one where the concept of ontic injustice applies, but I don’t believe we gain anything particularly interesting from thinking of it as an ontic injustice as contrasted with simply an injustice. I am deeply relaxed about this result because I don’t think of ontic injustice as a *sui generis* type of injustice. Rather, it is injustice in the perfectly familiar sense *that is raising its head in a (potentially) surprising place*—namely, within the ontology of social kinds. My aim in developing the concept of ontic injustice was not so much to say, “Look, here’s a very special kind of injustice,” as to say, “Look, injustice (in the familiar) sense has wormed its way in to social kinds. We should pay attention to this when we theorize about social kinds.”

The reason I think that it is interesting and worthwhile to point out that injustice can feature in the ontology of social kinds is that I believe getting a clear fix on this phenomenon will make a difference to our social theorizing and might well make some difference to what we should do in the world. But the extent to which this is so varies greatly between different cases. Identifying ontic injustice is most useful in relation to kinds that are being represented by at least some people (as a kind and/or through representing some people as kind members), because in those cases it might potentially give us a direct reason to change what we’re doing. For instance, someone might say. “I’m not wronging this person; I’m just representing them as a member of a certain kind. But it’s fine because I don’t want to go on to do anything harmful to them on the basis of that. I’m just being accurate.” Having the concept of ontic injustice allows us to say, “I hear you, and it’s not inaccurate. But in fact the very representing you are doing *is* wronging them, because you’re helping to perpetuate an ontic injustice.” On the other hand, in cases where there’s no representing going on, pointing out that there is an ontic injustice is unlikely to make much difference, if any, to what we ought to do if we already know that the case exhibits injustice generally speaking.

Is there any value *at all* in identifying ontic injustice in the case of nonrepresented social kinds? Perhaps a little; it enables us to say that all the members of the kind, whatever their particular social experiences, suffer the moral injury that is constitutive of ontic injustice.¹⁵ This in turn allows us to say that each and every member of the kind is wronged, even if some members escape the harmful impacts that are characteristic of the group’s social situation due to good luck, to privileges arising from other aspects of their identity, and so on. There are doubtless other ways to arrive at this conclusion without appealing to ontic injustice, but it does seem useful to have *some* way of arriving at it. But I think this is at best of modest interest; the noteworthy cases of ontic injustice are the ones where we *are* representing and

¹⁵ This is perhaps in line with the suggestion from an anonymous referee that Khalidi mentions in his footnote 12.

interacting with the kind in our social practices, and justice might demand that we do things differently once we notice that it is a site of ontic injustice.

In the final part of his comments, Khalidi asks, essentially, what kind of stance on the role of moral and political values in social scientific theorizing underpins my argument against the ontology-first approach (chapter 8). I'm certainly very sympathetic to the approach to answering this question that Khalidi outlines, drawing on Elizabeth Anderson's (2012) work on values in science. According to this Anderson-inspired approach, moral and political values should enter into our social enquiry by helping to determine (a) our research questions and priorities and (b) how we act on the results of our inquiry, but they should not directly influence theory choice in the sense of "decid[ing] which categories are needed to understand social phenomena" (Khalidi 2025, 16). It would be disingenuous to say that the position Khalidi outlines here "faithfully captures [my] view" (16) because I had not reached a view as explicit or lucid as the one Khalidi lays out. But it is certainly a position that chimes with the spirit of my approach, and one that I am strongly inclined to adopt now that it is offered to me.

If I were to add something to what Khalidi says, at this point in time, it would be that values can also properly guide the ways in which our theories are presented: if our research is motivated by an interest in emancipation, then we should care about communicating our theories in ways that render them as suitable as they can be for being used in emancipatory social movements. I think that this falls within the responsibility of the theorist or philosopher, and it is an important part of the method that I term "emancipatory theory" and which I discuss in the book's introduction.¹⁶ But, mostly, I need to think much more about all of this, and I am now better placed to do so thanks to Khalidi's insightful and constructive suggestions.

Reply to Russell

Russell insightfully elaborates on and extends several aspects of my arguments in the book, and I find all her points persuasive. Most centrally, perhaps, I am completely in agreement with Russell's illuminating comparison between my constraints and enablements framework (CEF) and her own compelling argument for the value of thinking of race as a technology (Russell 2018). It is extremely gratifying to know that the argument I offered in the book resonated across the analytic–Continental divide, since I was keen not to be bound by this (in my view rather problematic) division, while being aware that my own approach is distinctly (and, to some extent, unavoidably, given my training and tendencies) analytic in flavor. I appreciate Russell's encouragement to frame some of our shared commitments in

¹⁶ This of course relates to my point above, in response to Bettcher, about language choice.

terms of a focus on what race *does* rather than what it *is*, and this will inform my own approach to these questions going forward. The particular case of her experiences in Togo is extremely illuminating, and I agree completely with the ways in which she integrates it with the CEF.

A point that Russell makes with which I agree particularly strongly is the importance of accounting for “the way much of our thinking about race has faded into the background, shaping our view of the world without our being fully conscious of it” (2025, 6). I think there is much more work to be done here, and I feel I am better placed to contribute to it based on thinking about Russell’s comments and her work more broadly.

In the eighth and final chapter of the book, I argue that we should reject the ontology-first approach in the context of debates about gender recognition. Russell compellingly extends this point to the case of debates about the metaphysics of race, and I am in complete agreement with her analysis. This chapter is also where I discussed the vexed issue of so-called “transracialism,” a point that Russell takes up. She argues, and I completely agree, that we should approach the limited number of transracial identity claims we may encounter with “an extra dose of philosophical caution and humility—and always with due attention to the ethical implications for the people already inhabiting various identities” (Russell 2025, 11). Russell is here highlighting the vital importance of attending to the level of collective experience and not solely the level of individual experience. Where I talk about engaging with experiences of complex racial identity “in their own right” rather than as an offshoot of discussion of the experiences of trans(gender) people (or, worse, as a stick to beat trans(gender) people with), Russell stresses that “it is important that ‘in their own right’ not be understood as ‘on a purely individual basis’” (11). I certainly never intended that it should be so understood, and I am grateful for the chance to clarify this.

Finally, let me speak to Russell’s friendly suggestion that it may have been better to write the book in what is basically reverse order: beginning with the concrete and particular and working from there to the more general theoretical apparatus. I think Russell is right about the ways in which the structure she sketches better reflects some methodological commitments that I think she and I share. What I think the *actual* structure of the book reflects above all is the sequence that my own thinking needed to follow in order to arrive where I wanted to. The very grounded and context-specific considerations discussed in the final chapter very much underpinned my motivation for wanting to write the book, but I found I needed to work out theoretical detail the preceding chapters before feeling confident in my analysis of these more contextualized issues. But of course, the sequence of the writer’s thinking need not be, and often is not, the sequence that represents the optimally helpful trajectory for the reader to follow.

If I were to attempt to defend (rather than merely causally explain) the sequence I did adopt, the main consideration to which I would appeal is something like *user-friendliness*. By giving the general apparatus of ontic injustice, ontic oppression, and the constraints and enablements framework up front, I hoped to make them readily available to people who did not share my interest in questions concerning gender recognition and so-called “transracialism” but who might want to use these resources for other purposes. So this thought reconciles me somewhat to the way the book in fact ended up, even though Russell may well be correct that it would have been more effective overall to reverse the sequence. That said, I suspect that by the time I arrived at the version of the book that was published, the challenge of undertaking such a comprehensive rewrite might have been beyond my capabilities.

On this note, I’d like to end by thanking Bettcher, Khalidi, and Russell once again. Although writing any book is a process that typically has its ups and downs, the fact that I was writing about such sensitive and contested topics in an increasingly alarming and hostile political context made my work on this book in particular feel, at times, especially fraught. To receive such generous and insightful critical responses to the finished book has, accordingly, been all the more precious. Overall, the experience of thinking philosophically together with such superlative interlocutors has been both a privilege and a pleasure, and I am deeply grateful to each of them.

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