

Today's Orthodoxies Put Quotation Marks Around 'Freedom'

by Theodore Dalrymple



Professor Kathleen Stock

How revealing a little punctuation mark may be! A recent headline in the left-leaning, once liberal newspaper, the Guardian, ran a story with a headline as follows: "University defends 'academic freedoms' after calls to sack professor."

The university was Sussex and the professor was Kathleen Stock, a feminist philosopher. She was accused of the thoughtcrime of transphobia by an anonymous group, which demanded that she be sacked from the university.

The vice-chancellor, Professor Alan Tickell, was forthright in his response—alas, untypically so for persons in his position: "We cannot and will not tolerate threats to cherished academic freedoms and will take any action necessary to protect the rights of our community."

Professor Stock's thoughtcrime was to have thought and said openly that you cannot change your biological identity simply by wishing to do so and by taking a few drugs or having a few operations.

Your identity is not determined wholly by what you feel that you are, or what you would like to be: some things are given, among them sex. Reality places limits upon us.

A person who undergoes sex-change procedures as they are currently practiced is only metaphorically a person of the sex opposite to his or her original biological sex.

One day it may be possible for science to go further than the current crude methods permit, but that day is probably a long way off. For the moment, as Robert Burns put it in another context, “a man’s a man for a’ that.”

Until this call for Professor Stock to be sacked from her chair of philosophy, I confess that I did not know anything about her. But these days it is easy to familiarize yourself with someone’s work, at least in outline, and it is clear that she is not an extremist of the kind who would, say, call for the removal of trans-gender persons to prison camps, or anything remotely similar.

She is concerned mainly with the untruth of the claims made by some activists who use untrue claims to influence public policy. Whether or not you agree with her is hardly the question, though in fact she couches her arguments in the language of rationality and without stridency.

She is accused of transphobia: these days activists of many kinds reduce those who disagree with them to the mental level of those who are irrationally afraid of spiders, though with the connotation not only of irrationality but of moral defect. And, of course, moral defect is a good pretext for shutting people up. After all, why should bad people be allowed to speak?

Those who called for her dismissal were in effect saying that no one who holds her views should be allowed to teach in a university. Only those with certifiably “correct” views should be permitted to do so. As Fidel Castro put it fifty years ago, “Within the revolution everything, against the revolution nothing.”

The Guardian’s headline was interesting because of the quotation marks around the words “academic freedoms.” These quotation marks were meant to imply that the very notion of [*Epoch Times*](#).