

Philosophy not Ideology: A Response to Ward Jones and Lindsay Kelland

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Ward Jones and Lindsay Kelland's [review](#) of *The Second Sexism*, is the nastiest academic review of this book yet to be published. Its shortcomings suggest that its authors are so wrapped up in the orthodoxies of a particular conception of feminism that they are unable to see the arguments that challenge their deep-seated assumptions.

They raise a series of objections that were considered and responded to in the book, yet with rare exceptions, they are content simply to reiterate those objections without actually engaging my responses to them, let alone even mentioning that I have provided responses. Readers of their review who have not read the book, especially those who share their assumptions, will thus wonder how silly I must be not to have considered those arguments. It is a neat rhetorical flourish, but it is not philosophy.

I cannot reiterate here all the careful, detailed arguments of the book. However, I shall discuss a number of ways in which the reviewers have bypassed rather than actually engaged my arguments.

“Patriarchy”:

Professor Jones and Dr Kelland do not deny that men and boys suffer some forms of disadvantage, although their review suggests that there are only three (main) examples – conscription, criminal (non-sexual) violence and corporal punishment. They ignore numerous other examples of significant disadvantage I provide. In this way they mislead their readers about the full extent of what I call the “second sexism”.

They claim that none of the examples of disadvantage are instances of a second sexism. Instead, they claim, these are all ways in which patriarchy harms men – all examples of “men hurting themselves in the process of hurting women”.

The central problem with this argument is that it assumes rather than argues for an explanatory paradigm – patriarchy (which they describe as “the broad and pervasive attempt by men to control the lives of women and girls”). Those in the grip of current academic orthodoxies will no doubt be happy with that assumption. The job of the philosopher, however, is to step back and question assumptions.

The reviewers have not considered the possibility that patriarchy (as understood above) may be one, but not the only important manifestation of a higher-level phenomenon – gender role expectations. Such role expectations could explain both patriarchy and serious forms of discrimination against men, many of the latter having nothing to do with men attempting to control the lives of women and girls. On this view, the problem is that people are expected to conform to gender roles and that this disadvantages both females and males (although, as I explicitly say in the book, not always to the same extent).

Perhaps the reviewers, in response, will want to suggest that we have no need to postulate a higher explanatory level. They might insist that gender roles are themselves a feature of patriarchy. However, if that were the case, then we would expect that the harms men suffer would diminish as discrimination against women and girls erodes. If men’s suffering is a product of their control of women’s lives, then men should suffer less as patriarchy weakens and they lose control over women’s lives.

Yet we find that the female gender role has, in some places, broken down considerably without a comparable weakening of the male gender role in those same places. This can be explained, on my view, by observing that the male gender role (and its associated disadvantages) has proved much more stubborn than the female gender role. It is not so readily explained by the patriarchy hypothesis.

There is plenty evidence that male disadvantage often does not decline as female disadvantage withers. Women acquired the vote without then being forcibly sent into battle, as men often are. When societies began sending girls to school they (usually) did not start beating them there the way they did the boys. Women have entered professions previously dominated by males without males entering historically female

professions to anything like the same extent. In some cases the position of men even becomes worse as patriarchy declines. When western societies were more patriarchal, men automatically gained custody of their children following divorce. However, as discrimination against women declined, the cards became stacked against a man getting custody of his children.

On this note it is curious that the reviewers draw no distinction – as I do in *The Second Sexism* – between the varying degrees to which women and girls suffer discrimination in different societies. The reviewers see only “patriarchy”. They do not seem to see a difference between Australia and Afghanistan or between Sweden and Somalia. If these are all “patriarchies” then “patriarchy” must be a very thin concept indeed, and accordingly a much less helpful one than the reviewers assume.

This is not to deny that women in Australia and Sweden suffer some forms of discrimination. Instead it is to say that we cannot meaningfully equate the degree of discrimination women experience in those two countries with the degree of discrimination they suffer in Afghanistan and Somalia.

These differences suggest that even if, contrary to what I suggested above, patriarchy *does* explain the origin of gender role expectations, it could be that male gender role expectations have survived the withering of patriarchy. In that case, too, much discrimination against men is not – or, at least, no longer is – a byproduct of men harming women.

Thus it simply will not do to keep trotting out the claim that patriarchy is the explanation not only for all discrimination against women but also for any social disadvantages that men suffer. It may be a widespread assumption in the academy but it would not be the first time that academics have succumbed to dogma.

The reviewers have to contort themselves to make their case that all forms of male social disadvantage are merely instances of “men hurting themselves in the process of hurting women”. About corporal punishment, for example, which is disproportionately (and, in some places, only) inflicted on males, we are told that, given societal assumptions, “the default state--appropriate and effective physical

punishment--is applied to men and boys, whereas the patriarchal belief in women's need to be protected exempts them from such punishment.”

Here we are being told that the beating of men and boys is actually part of the way in which men control women and that that female immunity from floggings is a manifestation of discrimination against women and girls. This strains credulity. Patriarchal men could very effectively control women without beating other men and small boys. They could do so by denying that corporal punishment is the “default state”. That corporal punishment has been – and in many places continues to be – the default state (for males), has nothing to do with the control of women. It has lots to do with (sexist) ideas about the acceptability of treating males roughly.

Moreover, the reviewers ignore that most *domestic* physical punishment of children, disproportionately boys, is inflicted by *mothers* not fathers¹. Thus we are being asked to believe that women hitting boys is one way in which “men hurt themselves in the process of hurting women”. Only those firmly in the grip of an ideological commitment could believe this sort of drivel².

Perhaps the reviewers will claim that these mothers have simply internalized the views of patriarchy. But this only deepens the impression that the “patriarchy” hypothesis is an unfalsifiable one. Any disadvantage women suffer is, we are told, the product of patriarchy, but so is any disadvantage men suffer. No evidence that is brought against this hypothesis causes those who believe it to revise their views. Are we really to believe that these all-powerful males are unable to maintain their purported control without inflicting all these harms on other males? (For more see, for example, pp. 183, 194-199.)

Professor Jones and Dr Kelland exhibit a deep moral insensitivity when they say that we really need not be very concerned, or concerned at all, about the harms that men suffer. Their analogy is this:

If we come across one person unjustifiably hurting another, it is not clear that we should be much, or at all, concerned by the fact that the perpetrator is getting blisters on his hand in the process.

This assumes that (most of) the harms men suffer are the byproduct of harms they inflict on women. Yet this is an assumption against which I have argued. (See also pp. 194-199.) Their insensitive claim makes another mistaken assumption, namely that men are an indivisible unit. The reality is that some men are harming *other* men and we should be no less concerned about male victims just because those harming them belong to the same sex (pp. 123-124.)

The reviewers at least acknowledge that I have made this point. They say that I am eager to point out that in most cases, the discrimination ... will be a discrimination against certain men ("plebian males") by other men ("alpha males").

However, they say that I do not “notice the obvious implication of this claim, namely that we are no longer talking about gender discrimination, but about something like *class* or *race* discrimination.”

There are two problems here. First, I did not say that *most cases* of discrimination against males are cases of discrimination by “alpha males” against “plebian males”. Instead I suggested that there are some such cases.

Second, and more important, the implication that the reviewers allege is not an implication at all. I was quite explicit that just as discrimination against women can intersect with discrimination on the basis of class and race, so discrimination against men can have such intersections. The presence of an intersection does not mean that sex discrimination is not at play (pp. 195-196, 251). The reviewers see fit to ignore the argument about intersection rather than to engage it.

False attributions:

The reviewers falsely attribute certain views to me. For example they ascribe to me the view that some instances of discrimination against men are (quoting them) “to be explained by the widespread belief that men are less valuable than women”. They call this a “jaw-droppingly daft suggestion”.

What really causes the jaw to drop is the sloppiness with which these reviewers represent my claim. I never claimed that there is a “belief that men are less valuable than women”. Instead I claimed – and here I am using my words – that “male *life is often* believed to be less valuable than female life” (p. 78, emphases not in the original). Immediately following this I said:

I do not mean by this that *every* society unequivocally values male lives less than female lives. This cannot be true, because there are some societies in which female infants are killed precisely because they are female. However, even in many such societies, the lives of adult males seem to be valued less than those of adult females. (Ibid.)

My actual claim, which is much more nuanced than the one attributed to me, was defended with abundant evidence, none of which the reviewers mention or dispute.

Trivialization:

In a number of places the reviewers trivialize my argument. For instance, they say that some of my “examples of men's disadvantages--for example, that in most public toilets there are no stalls between urinals, that men's contraceptive choices are limited to vasectomies and condoms can be set aside as insignificant (and silly)”.

The trivialization effect is achieved by taking these examples out of context. The first was a (minor) example I appended to a long discussion of how male bodily privacy is taken less seriously than female bodily privacy. The main example I considered was cross-gender supervision in prisons (pp. 54-56, 142-152). The courts have been much more sympathetic to female complainants than to male ones, even when male bodily privacy has been egregiously violated by female guards.

The second example was part of a broader discussion about asymmetrical control over the acquisition of parental responsibility. It was thus not merely about how many methods of contraception men have available to them.

Feminists point to dozens of *relatively* trivial examples of sexism – different connotations to the words “bachelor” and “spinster”, for example, or the use of the male pronoun to refer to somebody of indeterminate sex. Presumably those feminists do not think that those examples are “insignificant and silly” – and would be outraged if they were so described. The invasions of male bodily privacy in prisons and the lesser control men have over acquiring parental responsibilities are *at least* as weighty as these. Moreover, when female bodily privacy is invaded and when women have less control over whether they acquire parental responsibilities, feminists rightly object. It would show some even-handedness if similar concern could be extended to males.

Special pleading:

The reviewers engage in much special pleading. Some examples are implicit above, but there is another when they say that “service in the military--conscripted or not--has long been associated not with feelings of shame or hardship, but with feelings of pride, duty, honor, valor, and courage.”

The reviewers elsewhere noted that women often internalize social expectations of them. Yet, here the reviewers ignore the possibility that all the talk about “pride, duty, honor, valor, and courage” may be ways of getting men to internalize society’s expectations of them or a manifestation of men’s having internalized those expectations.

Moreover, it is noteworthy that even these attempts to have men assume the very serious burdens of battle fail in those many cases in which conscription is resorted to. The unwillingly conscripted men are much more interested in their freedom, their health and their lives. When they are enlisted and sent into battle against their wills they are victims. When similar treatment is not inflicted on women, the victimization is also on the grounds of men’s being male.

Finally, child-bearing and child-rearing are also prized and yet that correctly has not stopped feminists from claiming that women should not be socially or legally pressured into these roles.

More suppressed objections:

In addition to the examples I have provided above, there are other cases in which the reviewers ignore responses I actually offered. For example, they say that “for the most part, men are not the targets of violence *as men*”. I gave arguments to show that they actually are often targeted *as men*. These included evidence from the laboratory, showing that both men and women are more inclined to inflict violence on males than on females. It also included many real life examples where men were targeted as men. I was careful to say that this is not always the case (p. 127), but I showed that it often is.

In response to my claim that there are “stronger social norms discouraging violence against women” (p. 125), the reviewers say that this “claim is outright contradicted by global rape statistics”.

First, in the place they cite, I was speaking about *non-sexual* violence rather than sexual violence. In any event, I never denied that women are raped, nor that the great majority of rape victims are female. I explicitly stated that they are (p. 36). The issue is how society responds to rape³. There are, of course, many places, where it is not taken sufficiently seriously or the response is to condemn the victim⁴.

Consider, however, the different attitudes in liberal democracies towards rape of women and towards violence against men. Condemning rape elicits no controversy. However, speaking up for male victims (*qua* male victims), elicits the sort of indignation these reviewers of my book have vented. In my country (South Africa) there is an annual campaign of sixteen days of activism against violence against women and children. When I suggested (in the popular press in 2012) that we should *also* be concerned about the many male victims, some people were [outraged](#).

This, along with other evidence suggests that there are stronger social norms discouraging violence against women. Violence is inflicted on both females and males but the strength of the norms against this violence is asymmetrical.

Ad hominem conclusions:

Professor Jones and Dr Kelland seem to think that *ad hominem* comments are made acceptable by preceding them with the disclaimer that such comments “must be chosen with careful consideration”. They say that in the face of “such weak arguments” as those they have attributed to me, some “personal questions” about me are raised. They then pronounce that I am “motivated less by a concern for men than ... with attacking feminism” and that the *Second Sexism* strikes them “as the work of a man who is nothing short of *jealous* of the attention that feminists give women”.

Their amateur psychologizing is dead wrong, but I doubt that they will put any store on my assurances. Thus I shall appeal to basic academic decency, which requires them to employ the “principle of charity” in interpreting what people say.

What I said in the book was that I endorse feminism’s attention to discrimination against women, but that the commitments of egalitarian feminism require those – myself included – who espouse this view, *also* to give attention to the second sexism. I am critical of feminism insofar as it fails to follow the logic of egalitarianism and instead becomes a partisan advancement of female interests. None of the arguments in the book are inconsistent with these views and thus the most charitable and reasonable reading of me is at odds with their mean-spirited one.

Finally, in contemporary academic circles the *ad hominem* argument that they level has a rhetorical force that a comparable *ad feminem* argument would not have. Impugning the motives of a female who is concerned about discrimination against women would (today) backfire in a way in which impugning the motives of a male who is *also* concerned about discrimination against males does not. Accordingly, my reviewers are part of the very problem I describe. In dismissing the second sexism, they attempt to block the first step to countering it, namely recognizing that it exists. They may think that is a very “progressive” position, but it is not.

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¹ Many feminists are quick to observe that the explanation of this is that women's gender role thrusts them disproportionately into the child caring role. However, like so many other arguments, I addressed this one in *The Second Sexism* (p. 244).

² It does not end here. The reviewers say that it "is telling that Benatar never considers the possibility that women and girls are being discriminated against by the *noncorporal* punishment that they, but not the men and boys, receive." This is an instance of the "inversion" strategy that I discuss in *The Second Sexism* (pp. 174-194). Pause, for a moment, and imagine a world in which girls were routinely beaten, including for such "transgressions" as making spelling mistakes or being "offside" in a sports match, but that boys were exempt. Would Professor Jones and Dr Kelland really consider it a reasonable possibility that it was the boys rather than the girls in that world who were being discriminated against?

³ Similarly, the fact that there are many murders does not mean there are not strong social norms discouraging murder.

⁴ I show that there are similar problems when the victims of sexual assault are males.