

Visions of Gender Abolition: Against Aiming for Total Elimination

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1. Introduction

Feminists have long argued that gender is not the natural consequence of a biological division between sexes, but an oppressive social construction. The oppressive nature of gender has led many feminists to see gender abolition as the proper aim of gender liberation movements.¹ A closer look at what is meant by gender abolition, however, reveals significantly different conceptions of what gender abolition would entail, including, for instance, material redistribution, the use of reproductive and bodily technologies, the elimination of gendered divisions of labor, androgynous personalities, the proliferation of gender categories, and the elimination of gender norms. In light of this diversity, I will use 'gender abolition' to broadly encompass a range of radical social transformations aimed not just at eradicating gender oppression, but also at fundamentally altering or eliminating gender norms, roles, or categories in some way. This broadness means that some of the proposals that I include under the umbrella of gender abolition would not be counted as abolitionist by others.

The central subject of this paper concerns what kind of vision of gender abolition we should embrace. In particular, I will consider whether we should embrace a particularly extreme version of gender abolition that involves not just material redistribution, the elimination of gender hierarchies, or the elimination of unjust gender norms, but also a total elimination of gender terms, categories, and identities.

I will consider whether we should embrace such a total elimination view from multiple angles. The first is from a more abstract, ideal theory perspective that considers the total elimination view as a view about what justice requires, or what a just society would look like; the second is from a more pragmatic perspective that focuses on how we should currently think about gender abolition and how we should set our aims as activists. Although I am interested in both of these perspectives and take them to be importantly interconnected, ultimately, I am most interested here in how we should presently set our aims as regards gender abolition.

In this paper, I argue that we should not embrace a *total elimination view* of gender abolition. As a starting point, I will argue that significant pragmatic considerations tell against presently believing that justice requires the total elimination of gender, particularly in a political climate rife with transphobia. In particular, I will suggest that accepting a total elimination view

¹ For example, (Connell 2003; Cuboniks ; Escalante 2015, 2018; Firestone 1971; Haslanger 2000; Lawford-Smith 2020; G. Rubin 1975; Weltman 2024; Wittig 2013)

threatens to impair how we relate to individuals with closely-held gender identities and, in the context of widespread transphobia, further endangers the lives and well-being of trans people. The central contribution of the paper, however, will be to develop a theoretical argument against the position that justice requires the total elimination of gender. I will argue that the concerns that have motivated a total elimination view of gender abolition are plausibly compatible with an alternative approach that does not totally eliminate gender terms, categories, and identities. I will refer to this alternative as a *reconstitution approach* to gender abolition, and I will focus on a particular version of the reconstitution approach that is centered on gender self-determination.² I will argue that proposals from trans theorists and activists calling for gender self-determination, if taken seriously, plausibly point to a way of radically transforming social relations that would eliminate the oppressive aspects of gender that feminists have been concerned about, while allowing for the preservation of gender terms, categories, and identities. This gives us good reason to doubt the total elimination view as a view of justice, which, in conjunction with the pragmatic argument, gives us reason not to believe that justice requires the total elimination of gender, or to set total elimination as the ultimate aim of our gender liberation movements.

The paper will proceed as follows. In Section 2, I will clarify the total elimination view by contrasting it with alternative views of gender abolition. In Section 3, I will offer an initial pragmatic argument against the total elimination view, drawing on existing arguments in the literature. In Section 4, I will consider the various oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism; I will take for granted that justice requires eliminating all of these features. In Section 5, I develop the central argument that eliminating the oppressive features of gender plausibly does not require totally eliminating gender, but is instead compatible with reconstituting gender along the lines of gender self-determination. In Section 6, I conclude that, given the central theoretical argument and the initial pragmatic argument, we should not accept the total elimination view of gender abolition.

2. The Total Elimination View

To begin, I want to set up the main target of this paper, which I will refer to as the total elimination view of gender abolition. We can find a representation of the total elimination view in Weltman's description of gender abolition:

² I am borrowing the language of reconstitution from (Connell 2003).

[I]f we eliminated gender, we would not use gender categories like ‘woman’ and ‘man’ to describe human beings, or to sort them into categories that determine what bathrooms, sports leagues, jobs, or marriages they can avail themselves of, nor would we expect people to act in various ways in virtue of their gender. There would be neither gender roles nor gender identity: Nobody would act in certain ways in light of their gender or conceive of themselves as having a gender. (Weltman 2024: 511-12)

Weltman’s characterization of gender abolition includes the elimination of a wide range of phenomena: gender norms, gender roles, gender identities, gender-specific institutional spaces or statuses, and the ascription of gender terms to individuals. Of particular relevance for my argument is Weltman’s specification that, in the abolitionist world that we should be aiming for, there would be no gender identity and “nobody would act in certain ways in light of their gender or conceive of themselves as having a gender.”

Not all views of gender abolition in the literature are total elimination views. Firestone (1975), for instance, offers a vision of abolition that is squarely focused on radical material transformations: freeing women from reproductive labor, eliminating the gendered division of labor more generally, establishing economic independence for women and children, eliminating gender-based segregation, and eliminating all policing of sexuality.³ Firestone’s vision includes the elimination of gender norms, gender roles, and gender-segregated spaces and statuses, but is largely silent on gender identities or ascriptions. Similarly, a number of abolitionist views characterize gender abolition in terms of eliminating normative restrictions or other exercises of power along the lines of gender or sexual anatomy. Wright, for instance, characterizes gender abolition in terms of the elimination of “any systematic normative expectation that these traits and dispositions [that correspond to what we now view as feminine and masculine] closely correspond to the distinction between males and females,” as well as of costs associated with exhibiting patterns of feminine and masculine traits that do not conform to existing normative expectations.⁴ Similarly, the xenofeminist group Laboria Cuboniks characterizes gender abolition as “the ambition to construct a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power.”⁵ Hester, a member of Laboria Cuboniks, indicates that the kind of abolitionist world they are interested in

³ (Firestone 1971)

⁴ (Wright 2012: 405)

⁵ (Cuboniks: 0x0E)

is one of gender proliferation, not elimination: “Far from producing a genderless world, then, this form of abolition through proliferation is suggestive of a *multiply* gendered world.”⁶ Likewise, Matthew Cull argues that the only plausible version of gender abolition is one that proliferates, rather than eliminates, gender categories.⁷ There are differing views of what gender abolition would amount to, and not all abolitionist views are total elimination views.

The central question of this paper is whether we should accept a total elimination view of gender abolition. In exploring this question, I consider the total elimination view from multiple perspectives:

- 1.) As a view about justice: Does justice require the total elimination of gender?⁸
- 2.) As a belief someone might currently hold: Should we currently believe that justice ultimately requires the total elimination of gender?
- 3.) As an aim that we might set for our activist movements: Should we set the total elimination of gender as the ultimate aim of feminist or gender liberation movements?

I distinguish these perspectives to highlight that the subject of gender abolition brings together a host of disparate elements: ideal and non-ideal theory, theoretical and pragmatic considerations, and future-oriented considerations alongside present-day concerns. I am here ultimately most interested in questions (2) and (3), although I take it that the answers to these questions will be properly informed by arguments concerning what justice requires.

3. Initial Arguments Against the Total Elimination View

I will argue that we should not accept the total elimination view. More precisely, I will argue that (1) we should be dubious that justice requires the total elimination of gender; (2) we should not presently believe that justice requires the total elimination of gender; and (3) we should not set the total elimination of gender as the ultimate aim of our gender liberation movements.

My central argument will involve making a case for thinking that justice does not require the total elimination of gender. I will do so by arguing that there are alternative forms of gender abolition that would plausibly eliminate the oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism. This adds to existing arguments that call into question whether a society that sought or (apparently) attained the total elimination of gender would actually be a

⁶ (Hester 2018: 30) Emphasis in original.

⁷ (Cull 2024)

⁸ This is how Weltman understands the total elimination view: “Gender abolitionism is a view about justice: It says that a just society will have gotten rid of gender.” (Weltman 2024: 530)

just society. These are theoretical arguments against the total elimination view considered as a view about justice. I will also argue that, in contexts where there are individuals with closely-held gender identities, there are significant pragmatic reasons against believing that justice requires the total elimination of gender and setting the total elimination of gender as our ultimate goal as feminists. The pragmatic and theoretical arguments together suggest that we should not presently accept the total elimination view or set our ultimate aims as ones of total elimination.⁹

Arguing that there are alternative forms of gender abolition that would plausibly eliminate the oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism will be the work of the next several sections. In this section, I will present a pragmatic argument against accepting the total elimination view and review some existing arguments in the literature against thinking that justice requires the total elimination of gender.

In a context where many individuals have closely-held gender identities, there are pragmatic considerations that tell against forming the belief that justice requires the total elimination of gender, and setting our aims accordingly.

First, believing that justice requires the total elimination of gender threatens to impair one's relation to individuals with closely-held gender identities, and particularly, in contexts of widespread transphobia, with trans individuals.¹⁰ If justice requires the total elimination of gender, then justice requires that no individual have a gender identity. Having a gender identity is thereby undesirable from the total eliminativist perspective, as it poses an impediment to the achievement of justice. As a result, accepting the total elimination view threatens to alienate the eliminativist from individuals with gender identities, and particularly with closely-held gender identities. On one hand, for the eliminativist, it is easy to come to view someone as an obstacle because you take something to which they are deeply committed to play a significant role in sustaining injustice. Viewing someone as an obstacle is an objectifying

⁹ To clarify my disagreement with Weltman, I understand Weltman as being confident that justice requires total elimination and, therefore, that our ultimate aim should be one of total elimination. In contrast, I argue that there's good reason to think that justice does not require total elimination. On the other hand, Weltman and I agree that there is a pragmatic argument against pursuing total elimination at present. He, however, takes the upshot of this to be that we should only pursue the ultimate aim of totally eliminating gender when the conditions make it morally safe to do so. In contrast, I argue that we should not set total elimination as our ultimate aim, for both the theoretical reason that justice seems not to require total elimination, and for the pragmatic reason that pursuing total elimination would hurt, or at least significantly risk hurting, others, and especially trans people.

¹⁰ I take this to be closely related to Cull's argument that in seeking an abolitionist society, one seeks a society in which trans people are unwelcome. (Cull 2019: 10-11)

perspective that impedes genuine and authentic connection with them. Further, viewing someone as an impediment *to justice* encourages hostility towards them, particularly when the injustice in question deeply affects one personally. Precisely this kind of dynamic seems to have played a factor in fueling transphobia among some feminists. Sheila Jeffreys, for instance, understands “transgenderism” as being founded on harmful gender stereotypes and essentialist ideas.¹¹ She therefore sees trans people as reinforcing these harmful ideas when they make claims about their gender identities, and thus sees trans people as posing a serious harm to many people, particularly women. While it may be possible to avoid the objectifying perspective, my suggestion is that it is difficult to avoid in practice, particularly when one believes that one is personally threatened. Further, adopting this objectifying perspective is of particular concern, and plausibly more likely to occur, when the people being seen as an obstacle are already vulnerable and stigmatized, as in the case of trans people in contexts with high degrees of transphobia. On the other hand, for someone with a closely-held gender identity, it is also difficult to engage meaningfully with someone who views a central part of your identity as playing a significant role in sustaining injustice, and who believes that you ought to somehow get rid of something that is core to who you are. Believing that justice requires the elimination of gender identities thus threatens to alienate the total eliminativist from individuals with closely-held gender identities; it can impair our moral relationships with one another.

While the formulation of the argument here is third-personal, note that the potential harms can also be first-personal. That is, accepting the total elimination view can also cause a painful, internal rift for individuals who themselves have closely-held gender identities. Indeed, some trans feminists report experiencing a painful dilemma between feeling that self-actualization would require them to transition and feeling that transitioning would render them complicit in gender oppression.¹² This internal dilemma seems to reflect the belief that there is a tension between being invested in a gender identity and opposing gender oppression, presumably because of a belief that gender identities are inexorably tied to gender oppression. Accepting the total elimination view thus not only threatens to alienate us from others, but also to generate painful internal struggles that set one at odds with oneself.

¹¹ (Jeffreys 2014)

¹² For instance, we can see reflections of this in (Awkward-Rich 2017; Chu and Berg 2018; H. S. Rubin 1998; Zazanis 2019).

Accordingly, the first pragmatic argument is that accepting the total elimination view threatens to impair our moral relationships to individuals with closely-held gender identities. This in turn leads to a second pragmatic argument: seeing someone as an impediment to justice can easily lead to marginalizing treatment and violence, particularly in contexts of pre-existing marginalization. In particular, given widespread transphobia, accepting the total elimination view increases trans people's vulnerability to violence and marginalization. As we should not increase the risks faced by an already vulnerable and marginalized population, this tells against accepting the total elimination view in such contexts.¹³

Now, some might think that these risks can be adequately managed; or, some might think that any costs here are outweighed by the fact that justice ultimately requires the total elimination of gender, and so we should anyway believe the truth and set our aims toward justice— which means accepting the total elimination view.¹⁴ For this reason, I now turn to theoretical arguments that call into question whether justice requires the total elimination of gender.

Cull argues against gender abolition— which they seem to understand in terms of the total elimination view— on the grounds that eliminating gender categories would misgender, and thereby wrong, trans individuals. Cull draws on the work of Kapusta, who argues that misgendering isn't simply a matter of using the wrong pronouns to refer to someone, but extends more deeply to the ways in which we construct and theorize gender categories.¹⁵ Misgendering occurs when someone fails to treat an individual who sincerely identifies as a member of a gender category *G* as a member of *G*.¹⁶ Thus, a society that eliminates all gender categories— at least insofar as such categories are not recognized or accepted as options for identification— will misgender anyone who sincerely identifies as a member of a gender category, because it fails to recognize or treat them in accordance with their identity.¹⁷ As

¹³ Cull similarly makes the case that pursuing gender abolition imperils the lives of trans people. (Cull 2019)

¹⁴ For instance, although it is not clear that Lawford-Smith's account actually commits her to a total elimination view (because she focuses on the elimination of gender norms), she does suggest that abolitionist costs to trans people and conservative cis people is outweighed by the benefits to others. See (Lawford-Smith 2020)

¹⁵ (Cull 2019; Kapusta 2016)

¹⁶ (Cull 2019: 9)

¹⁷ As I touch on below, I think there is a significant empirical disagreement between Cull and at least some total eliminativists that relates to how they think about this situation. In particular, Cull thinks that we cannot prevent people from continuing to identify with gender categories, such that the elimination of gender categories can only go as far as failing to recognize these categories (or *apparently* eliminating these categories). In contrast, someone like Weltman thinks that if we eliminate gender categories, then

eliminating gender categories would wrong individuals with gender identities, this suggests that justice cannot require the elimination of gender categories.

Weltman argues that Cull's objection merely shows that we should hold off on eliminating gender categories.¹⁸ In the short run, we should respect the gender identities of people who have them – and so, avoid misgendering trans people – but we should, simultaneously, create conditions wherein new individuals will not come to develop gender identities. Eventually, there will be no one who has a gender identity, and we can then eliminate gender categories without misgendering anyone.

In the background of Cull and Weltman's disagreement about whether we should be working to eliminate gender categories is a disagreement about whether it is possible to create conditions where people no longer identify or come to identify with a gender category – without resorting to violence or imposing significant harms. Cull finds this highly implausible, whereas Weltman seems much more optimistic about the possibility. In particular, Weltman suggests that eliminating the oppressive conditions under which these identities have been forged would ultimately make gender identities recede in importance, and enable these identities to fade away. Given that the circumstances we are imagining are quite different from our own, I think it is hard to know how likely it is that gender identities would fade away under these conditions – for this reason, I will remain agnostic about this question.¹⁹ At present, however, and in part *because* of the uncertainty about how things might go under very different social conditions, the pragmatic arguments that I outlined above give us some reason to be wary of believing that we ought to eliminate gender identities.

With these initial arguments in the background, I will next turn to developing my central argument for thinking that justice does not require the total elimination of gender. This argument does not directly address whether we can justly bring about a society in which gender has been totally eliminated, but instead proceeds by arguing that there are alternative forms of abolition that would plausibly eliminate the oppressive features of gender that have largely motivated gender abolitionism. This suggests that justice does not require the total

this entails that no one identifies with the category (that is, if someone identifies with the category, then it has not been eliminated), and so there can be no harm of misgendering here. Thanks to Daniel Weltman [Redact] for pressing me on this point.

¹⁸ (Weltman 2024)

¹⁹ I think that remaining agnostic about this issue has significant implications for how we regard the total elimination view. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

elimination of gender, because it would be sufficient to pursue an alternative form of gender abolition.

My argument will begin by reviewing the oppressive features of gender that have largely motivated gender abolitionism.

4. The Oppressiveness of Gender

The simple argument for gender abolition is that gender is oppressive; since we should eliminate oppression, we should therefore eliminate, or abolish, gender. Because I am interested in what version of gender abolitionism we should accept, I want to take a closer look at what, exactly, is said to be oppressive about gender. Identifying the oppressive elements of gender provides a guide to what ought to be eliminated, and thus to the form of gender abolitionism that we should embrace.

A central aim of feminist theorizing has been to elucidate the oppressiveness of gender. Drawing on a range of traditions, I want to identify a number of interrelated features that capture different facets of the oppressiveness of gender, and which form the basis for abolitionist arguments. These features can roughly be grouped into two categories, corresponding to concerns about equality and concerns about freedom, respectively.

The concerns about freedom generally have to do with the ways that individuals are coercively forced into all-encompassing gender roles. From birth, individuals are assigned to the category *male* or *female* based on natal genitalia. If natal genitalia are ambiguous, many infants are subjected to “normalizing” genital surgery in order to be assigned to one of these categories.²⁰ These sex assignments are linked to a package of gender norms and roles, such that individuals assigned female are expected to be women, to act in accordance with norms for women, and to be treated in accordance with womanly scripts and schemas – in short, to fulfill the role of woman; likewise, individuals assigned male are expected to be men, conform to masculine norms, and, broadly, fulfill the role of man.²¹ Gender categories, norms, and roles are thus imposed on individuals without their consent, and regardless of their wishes. Not only are individuals expected to conform to norms and inhabit roles that they did not select for themselves, but these norms come with significant, including violent, sanctions that coercively enforce gender conformity.²² Individuals are policed for gender conformity both synchronically

²⁰ For an introduction to this issue, see (Mulkey et al. 2021)

²¹ For variations of this general idea, see, for instance, (Ásta 2018; Beauvoir 2011; Cuboniks ; Frye 1983; Haslanger 2012; Hester 2018; G. Rubin 1975).

²² For arguments that appeal especially to the violent and coercive nature of gender in motivating abolition, see for instance (Escalante 2015; Wright 2012)

(based on how they are perceived in a particular context), and diachronically (in alignment with how they were categorized, or how they are believed to have been categorized, at birth).²³ Further, gender norms and roles are all-encompassing in a way that is unjustified and objectionable.²⁴ Gender norms are not limited to a particular domain, but unjustifiably regulate how individuals may properly behave and express themselves across virtually all domains of life, from their occupation to the clothing that they wear, the amount of space they take up in a room, the beverages they drink, whether and how they may express affection for their friends, and much more. Individuals cannot pick and choose which norms to follow, but are policed for comprehensive gender conformity. This is connected to what Rowan Bell has referred to as coherence pressure, which refers to the expectation that individuals will conform to the whole bundle of norms associated with a gender category.²⁵ If an individual displays some feminine traits, for instance, then it is expected that their other traits will also cohere with feminine gender norms, and that they will not exhibit masculine traits. These concerns about freedom and restriction thus encompass forced assignment into gender roles, as well as the objectionably rigid and all-encompassing nature of gender roles that makes them cage-like.

The second main group of concerns has to do with equality: gender does not merely impose binary divisions, but creates relations of inequality. Traditionally, feminists have conceptualized the system of gender categories, norms, and roles as generating a hierarchy in which men occupy the dominant position and women occupy the subordinate position.²⁶ The concern is not merely about social status or power in the abstract. There is an important material dimension to these differences in power – one's gendered social positioning shapes, for instance, one's vulnerability to violence and other forms of abuse, as well as one's access to resources. More generally, one's gendered social positioning factors into whether one experiences systematic injustice, or instead systematically benefits from the disadvantage of others. Further, some feminists have pointed out that gender norms impose unfair, unjustified

²³ The diachronic element is related to what Bettcher terms identity enforcement and reality enforcement. See, for instance, (Bettcher 2007, 2014)

²⁴ (Vedder Forthcoming) argues that we should abolish these practices because they objectionably constraint individual autonomy.

²⁵ (Bell 2025)

²⁶ See, for instance, (Escalante 2018; Frye 1983; Haslanger 2000; Lawford-Smith 2020; Wittig 2013; Wright 2012). While this picture of a binary hierarchy separate from hierarchies of race, class, ability, etc. appears to be too simplistic when one takes into account intersectional considerations, the point stands that one's gendered social positioning makes a difference to one's social status and the amount of power that one has. See (Martín 2025).

double standards.²⁷ Still others have emphasized that gender norms devalue or stigmatize certain individuals and ways of being. There is, in particular, a tendency to view women and feminine-coded traits, values, or activities as inferior or frivolous²⁸. The devaluing of femininity can be understood as part of the story of how gendered social positioning results in gendered differences in power – for example, insofar as exhibiting feminine traits prevents one from being considered for leadership positions, the devaluing of femininity helps to explain why those positioned as women tend to have less power. The devaluing of femininity is thus in part significant because of its further material effects, but it is also objectionable because it results in unjustified stigmatization and marginalization. Although given relatively less attention by feminists, gender as a system does not just devalue femininity, but also systematically devalues and stigmatizes ways of being that are diversely embodied by queer and gender non-conforming individuals.

Although I have separated freedom-centric concerns from more equality-centered concerns, these issues are significantly interconnected: the coercively enforced division of individuals into comprehensive, binary gender roles on the basis of natal genitalia supports the material, hierarchical function of gender. For one, tying gender norms and roles to bodily features helps to create the illusion that these social divisions are natural and thereby justified.²⁹ Coherence pressure further helps to maintain the illusion that gender categories map on to natural kinds: by corraling individuals into comprehensive gender boxes that manifest minimally overlapping clusters of traits, coherence pressure allows us to point to the separate clusters as apparent evidence of binary gender kinds.³⁰ Thus, the practices that motivate the freedom-centric concerns help to rationalize and justify the practices that motivate the equality-centric concerns. Further, the coercive practices that assign and police gender categories facilitate the application of oppressive forces:

Practically, [the categories of men and women] must be not only distinct but relatively easily identifiable; the barriers and forces could not be suitably located and applied if there were often much doubt as to which individuals were to be contained and reduced, which were to dominate.³¹

²⁷ (Gheaus 2023)

²⁸ Serano, for instances, understands ‘traditional sexism’ in terms of the devaluing of women and femininity. (Serano 2009)

²⁹ Frye emphasizes this in (Frye 1983: 33)

³⁰ This point is made nicely by (Frye 1983: 34). See also (Fields and Fields 2012).

³¹ (Frye 1983: 33)

The restrictive aspects of gender are thus not only objectionable in themselves, but also play a key role in shoring up an ideology that justifies gender hierarchy, while also making it practically easier to position individuals within the inegalitarian, gendered field of power. Thus, again, the practices that motivate the freedom-centric concerns play an important role in supporting the practices that motivate the equality-centric concerns.

5. Abolition as Reconstitution

We can summarize the oppressive features of gender that have motivated a range of gender abolitionists as follows:

- Forced assignment to gender roles and norms, which is based on actual or imagined natal genitalia
- Coercive enforcement of gender norms
- Unjustified comprehensiveness of gender roles
- Coherence pressure
- Unequal distribution of power and resources based on gender (or on traits taken to be evidence of one's "proper" gender role)
- Morally objectionable gender norms that impose unfair double standards or sanction immoral behavior
- Devaluation or stigmatization of feminine, as well as queer-coded or gender non-conforming, traits, behaviors, and values

Let us take for granted that we should accept a vision of gender abolition that eliminates all of these oppressive features of gender. That is, let us proceed with the assumption that a just society would not only lack gender-based inequalities, but would also lack forced assignment to gender roles, coercive enforcement of gender norms, coherence pressure, and so on. Does this commit us to a total elimination view of gender abolition?

In considering the kind of world that feminist theory should lead us towards, R.W. Connell distinguishes between two goals that we might pursue: "one is the abolition of gender, the other its reconstitution on new bases."³² Connell is not decisive about these two pathways, but she acknowledges that alongside its significant oppressive dimensions, gender has also been centrally involved in the production of objects of significant cultural value. Accordingly, she is interested in whether the positive aspects or products of gender can be "disconnected from the structure of inequality, gender not abolished but reconstituted in unmurderous

³² (Connell 2003: 278)

forms.”³³ Connell suggests that central to the reconstitution of gender would be to do away with the fundamental sense that “gender is fatality.”³⁴ This sense of fatality arises from the myriad ways in which the shape of one’s body (one’s sex assignment) determines how one’s life should go, thanks to the naturalization of gender and the enforcement of comprehensive gender norms.

I will take up Connell’s idea of reconstituting gender in unmurderous forms by arguing that an approach to gender abolition that is focused on undoing gender as fatality plausibly offers a means of eliminating the oppressive features of gender, without requiring the total elimination of gender.³⁵ Drawing on work by trans theorists and activists, I will primarily focus on one possible form of gender reconstitution, which reconstitutes gender along a principle of gender self-determination.³⁶ Note that, in what follows, I will be taking for granted that dismantling gender hierarchies will require significant material changes, such as economic redistribution, eliminating the gendered division of labor, and attending to the ways that gender intersects with other systems of oppression. I take it that such changes will be part of any plausible version of gender abolition, and will thus focus on articulating what else would be required as part of a reconstitution view of gender abolition.

5.1. Deconstruction

We can think of gender reconstitution as having two sides, one with a negative, deconstructive focus, and the other with a positive, reconstitutive focus. The deconstructive aspect of gender reconstitution emphasizes undoing gender as fatality. Gender becomes fatality in the context of an ideology and social practices that normatively bind together sets of bodily traits, sets of behaviors, and gender category ascriptions, and which further assign power, status, and resources in accordance with one’s gender category assignment. Undoing gender as fatality requires undoing these normative binds, or what Ophelia Vedder calls *unbundling*.³⁷

³³ (Connell 2003: 280)

³⁴ (Connell 2003: 282)

³⁵ Note that I depart from Connell in construing reconstitution as a form of gender abolition, whereas she understands abolition in more total terms and describes reconstitution as an alternative. I take the reconstitution approach to abolition to broadly match what Belinsky and Cull term abolition as *Aufheben*, a Hegelian term with the contradictory meanings of preservation and destruction. See (Belinsky 2019; Cull 2024)

³⁶ I think this turns out to be quite similar to Cull’s pluralistic approach to gender, although I emphasize not only the proliferation of categories (in the sense of introducing new categories), but also pluralism in the sense of allowing for many diverse ways of taking up the same gender categories. It is not always clear to me if Cull sees this second kind of pluralism as part of their picture, though it may be accommodated by the ameliorative semantic pluralism portion of their view. See (Cull 2024: 83-109,67-68)

³⁷ Vedder argues that we should abolish gender in the sense of undertaking this unbundling process. I see this as complementary to my argument in this paper, insofar as it provides further support for a

To clarify what the deconstructive aspect of gender reconstitution requires, I will highlight various different normative binds that contribute to rendering gender as fatality.

First, certain sets of bodily traits (e.g. XY chromosomes, facial hair, testicles, a penis, and high levels of testosterone) are bound together through an ideology of natural, binary sex divisions. Coherence pressure applies to these bodily traits – if someone has one of these bodily traits, then they are expected to have all of them – and is enforced through, e.g., “normalization” surgeries, as well as other social practices.

Second, large sets of gendered behaviors (e.g. being nurturing, wearing dresses on formal occasions, shaving one’s legs, and sending holiday cards to family members) are also normatively bound together in an ideology of binary gender kinds. Coherence pressure also applies to these gendered behaviors.

Third, ideological binary gender kinds are also ideologically bound to the allegedly natural, binary sex division, such that women, for instance, are ideologically understood to just be adult human females. As a result, sex categories are normatively bound to gender categories: if one is assigned male at birth, then one is expected to be a man; if one is assigned female at birth, then one is expected to be a woman. This introduces further normative ties between sexed bodily traits, gendered behaviors, sex category ascriptions, and gender category ascriptions. Thus, someone who has facial hair, for example, is expected to be male, to have the other bodily traits from among the set of male-coded sex traits, to exhibit the set of behaviors expected of men, and to identify as a man. There are negative expectations here as well as positive ones: someone who has facial hair, for example, is also expected to *not* be female, to not have bodily traits from among the set of female-coded sex traits, to not exhibit behaviors expected of women, and to not identify as a woman.

Categorizing gender norms by the kinds of gendered traits that they normatively link together, Briggs and George offer a taxonomy that includes body-behavior, body-category, behavior-category, and body-behavior-category gender norms.³⁸ To emphasize the coherence pressure found within sets of sexed bodily traits and gendered behaviors, respectively, we can also add body-body and behavior-behavior norms to this taxonomy; likewise, we can add category-category norms (e.g. the normative expectation that the category *woman* will be co-

reconstitution approach to gender abolition (or at least, the deconstructive aspect). See (Vedder Forthcoming).

³⁸ (Briggs and George 2023) Note that Briggs and George refer to “sexed biology” and “biological traits,” but I prefer to instead refer to “bodily traits.”

extensive with the category *female*), if we distinguish sex categories from gender categories. Altogether, these gender norms and their attendant practices create comprehensive, oppressive social roles that are naturalized as sex differences, and which form a basis for gender hierarchy.

The deconstructive aspect of gender reconstitution involves severing these normative binds and prohibitions. This means eliminating the normative pressures that demand coherence within sets of bodily traits and gendered behaviors, respectively, as well as eliminating body-behavior, body-category, behavior-category, category-category, and body-behavior-category gender norms. We can think of this as being deconstructive insofar as it breaks down and separates different gendered pieces (viz.. particular bodily traits, behaviors, and category labels) that have been normatively bundled together to constitute oppressive gender roles within hegemonic gender systems. Gender reconstitution also demands that we reject the ideologies of sex and gender that reinforce and naturalize these normative binds, as well as the social practices involved in coercively enforcing these norms.

5.2. Gender Self-Determination

Following the negative aspect of gender reconstitution, the positive vision of gender reconstitution that I will focus on reconstitutes gender along a principle of gender self-determination. This represents a radical break from the practices that constitute gender as a system, while simultaneously being continuous with how gender has operated in our world in certain ways, particularly on the level of individual identity.

The principle of gender self-determination that I focus on builds on Julia Serano's admonishment to "stop projecting our beliefs about gender onto other people's behaviors and bodies," and to instead allow individuals to interpret and define gendered traits and categories for themselves.³⁹ Gender self-determination is sometimes understood as allowing individuals to choose which gender categories, if any, they want to be sorted into.⁴⁰ While this is part of the picture I have in mind, this characterization may be understood as suggesting that individuals are merely allowed to choose which hegemonic category or role they want to be slotted into.⁴¹ This would, however, preserve the oppressive features of gender we have been concerned with. In particular, it would preserve the normative binds that I have just said must to be severed as part of reconstituting gender.

³⁹ (Serano 2009: 193)

⁴⁰ This is, for instance, how Briggs and George primarily seem to characterize gender self-determination. (Briggs and George 2023)

⁴¹ See, for instance, (Lawford-Smith 2020).

Accordingly, the sense of gender self-determination I have in mind is more radical than merely choosing a hegemonic gender role or category. Gender self-determination leaves gendered traits, concepts, categories, and terms unfixed and open-ended. Further, a society that adheres to a principle of gender self-determination is one where individuals' *gender feels* are respected.⁴²

I want to expand on what I mean by saying that gender self-determination leaves gendered traits, categories, and terms unfixed and open-ended.

First, the open-endedness of gender self-determination includes allowing for the proliferation, revision, and elimination of gender categories. This includes, on one hand, accepting the introduction of neogenders, if there are individuals who adopt these categories. On the other hand, it also includes allowing traditional gender categories to fade away, if there are no individuals who adopt these categories or make use of these category terms as hermeneutical resources. It also includes allowing traditional categories to undergo significant changes, if the ways in which individuals adopt and interpret these categories changes.

Second, the open-endedness of gender self-determination also includes allowing individuals to practically determine what gendered traits and categories mean for them, and respecting these determinations.⁴³ Under a principle of self-determination, what counts as gendered, and in what way, is indexed to the subjective interpretation of a particular agent at a given time, rather than to the ideology and practices of a social milieu. For instance, wearing a set of long, acrylic nails is traditionally understood as a gendered behavior and, in particular, as a feminine behavior; this understanding is indexed to the hegemonic norms and practices of a particular social milieu. In contrast, under a principle of self-determination, whether wearing a set of long, acrylic nails counts as gendered, and further, whether it counts as *feminine*, is relative to a particular agent. Thus, the open-endedness of gender self-determination allows that an individual might, for instance, reinterpret what are traditionally considered feminine traits as masculine traits, or see traditionally feminine traits as ungendered.

Third, gender self-determination allows individuals to combine bodily traits, gendered behaviors, and gender categories in ways that make sense to and for them, carving out self-fashioned roles for themselves as (and if) they see fit. It thus replaces coercively-enforced normative links between gendered traits with self-determined, non-enforced links (or no links

⁴² I take this term from Briggs and George (2023), and expand upon it below.

⁴³ At least, within the bounds of morality. These determinations do not need to be respected if they involve harming others.

at all). It also allows individuals to move fluidly between gendered traits and categories, and to recombine traits, behaviors, and categories over time.⁴⁴ Broadly, adhering to a principle of gender self-determination involves treating gender concepts, categories, terms, and images as resources that individuals can take up, re-combine, adapt, or reject in interpreting their experiences and shaping their agency – without normative pressure to do so, or to do so in any particular way. There is no enforced fidelity to hegemonic meanings and norms.

The second and third aspects of gender self-determination are closely related to a fourth: the open-endedness of gender self-determination also includes, as Briggs and George (2023) emphasize, treating gender categories as *irreducible*. A category is irreducible when there are no base properties that category membership can be universally explicated in terms of. If we take the category woman to be irreducible, for instance, then we accept that being appropriately classified as a woman is not dependent on having certain bodily traits, exhibiting certain behaviors, being subjected to certain norms, having certain experiences, or possessing any other general base properties.⁴⁵ Note that this is compatible with it being the case that, for a particular individual, *her* being a woman *is* explanatorily connected to their possessing some particular property, such as having had certain formative experiences. However, another individual could have the same experiences, or indeed all of the same base properties, and not be a woman. Treating gender categories as irreducible means accepting that there are no generally applicable necessary and sufficient conditions that determine membership in a gender category.

While I have thus far mostly focused on how gender categories and gendered meanings would be reconstituted in adherence to a principle of self-determination, I also want to emphasize how adherence to a principle of self-determination extends to interpersonal interactions. Adhering to a principle of gender self-determination includes respecting others' gender feels and, where feasible, engaging in gender affirmation.⁴⁶ Briggs and George characterize a gender feel as "an attitude or disposition about the fact or possibility of one's possessing [a gendered] trait."⁴⁷ Respecting someone's gender feels involves generally assuming that they are sincere, competent, and coherent in reporting their gender feels, treating

⁴⁴ Further, Camp and Flores suggest an even more fluid picture on which individuals take on identity labels to access certain agential modes in particular, circumscribed contexts. Gender self-determination could also take the form of these very fluid, short-lived uses of gender labels, rather than more stable identities or roles. See (Camp and Flores 2024)

⁴⁵ (Briggs and George 2023: 15)

⁴⁶ This framework also draws heavily on Bettcher's work on ethical first-person authority. See (Bettcher 2009)

⁴⁷ (Briggs and George 2023: 38)

them as they want to be treated, and engaging with them from a place of moral respect.⁴⁸ This includes granting individuals the autonomy to act on their gender feels and to express themselves freely, without fear of violence or sanctions.⁴⁹

Respecting someone's gender feels also plausibly includes engaging in gender affirmation, at least in the context of intimate relationships. E.M. Hernandez characterizes gender affirmation as exercising loving attention, which involves seeing someone on their own terms, such that "their cares, concerns, needs, desires, and self-conception are salient, rather than the cares, concerns, needs, and desires of the perceiver."⁵⁰ Seeing someone on their own terms requires a degree of intimacy and authentic engagement, and becomes more challenging the more that someone's perspective may diverge from one's own. This becomes particularly relevant when we imagine social conditions that adhere to a principle of gender self-determination, as such conditions would allow for increasingly divergent gender perspectives. For instance, in a world where acrylic nails can have multiple gendered meanings, or no gendered meaning at all, one requires personal knowledge in order to understand the expressive significance of someone's choice to wear a set of nails. For this reason, there are practical limits on the extent to which we can successfully exercise loving attention in our interactions with others.⁵¹ Thus, the demand to engage in gender affirmation will plausibly depend on the nature and strength of one's relationship to someone. But part of adhering to a principle of gender self-determination and respecting someone's gender feels includes, as far as is feasible, seeing them on their own terms and treating them accordingly.

To summarize, in addition to significant material changes, the form of gender reconstitution that I have outlined involves a deconstructive process – which severs normative ties between traditionally gendered traits, eliminates the coercive enforcement of gender roles, and rejects hegemonic gender ideology – as well as the reconstitution of gender along a principle of gender self-determination, which leaves gender terms, categories, and traits open and unfixed, and respects other individuals' gender feels and personal interpretations of gender, as applied to themselves.

⁴⁸ (Briggs and George 2023: 101-05)

⁴⁹ As Briggs and George acknowledge, there are reasonable limits here. For instance, we are not required to act immorally or to tolerate immoral behavior in respecting someone's gender feels.

⁵⁰ (Hernandez 2021: 621)

⁵¹ Also for this reason, I think that supporting gender affirmation in intimate contexts can actually be compatible with advocating for, e.g., reforming English so that it is much more gender neutral, for the kinds of reasons (e.g. protecting privacy, avoiding misgendering, and egalitarianism) that Dembroff and Wodak cite. See (Dembroff and Wodak 2018).

5.3. Continuity & Departure

Gender reconstituted along the lines of gender self-determination departs radically from gender as it has existed. It is gender without norms, assigned roles, coercive enforcement, double standards, or coherence pressure; it does not take biology to determine one's proper place in the world, and it does not stigmatize feminine or queer ways of being in the world. It is, thus, gender stripped of the oppressive elements that feminists have been concerned about. Insofar as gender is understood as fundamentally anchored in hierarchy and oppressive restriction, the result of gender reconstitution is not *gender* at all, but a new kind of thing – this is why I take gender reconstitution to be a form of gender abolition. But it is a form of gender abolition that, unlike the total elimination view, does not demand that we scrub away all traces of gender. In particular, it allows that we could still use terms like 'woman' and 'man' to describe individuals, that individuals could still conceive of themselves as having a gender, and that individuals could act in certain ways in light of their gender – although all of these things would look quite different, or have very different meanings, from what they do today.⁵²

Although gender reconstituted along the lines of gender self-determination represents a radical, abolitionist departure from gender, it is also continuous with gender in some significant ways. In particular, this picture of gender reconstitution retains – or more accurately, allows for the retention of – gender subjectivity, while also allowing gender terms and concepts to function as hermeneutical resources.

In referring to gender subjectivity, I draw on Florence Ashley's account of gender identity. On Ashley's account, many people, as a result of living in a world that is deeply shaped by gender norms and practices, acquire a gendered lens that shapes the phenomenological quality and interpretation of their experiences. This gendered lens gives rise to "gendered experiences of oneself" that capture how "our affects, attitudes, character, cognition, behaviours, mannerisms, relationships, appearances, and bodies are experienced as relating to our gender, including as feminine, masculine, androgynous, female, male, manly, boyish, girly, womanly, unisex, genderqueer, butch, masc, femme, and so on."⁵³ Gender subjectivity, then, refers to the totality of one's gendered experiences, and gender identity

⁵² In this way, my view is similar to Belinsky's view of abolition as *Aufhaben*, insofar as Belinsky imagines expanding gender to the point where it "becomes a merely aesthetic or 'personal' vector of identification." I would not say that gender will necessarily be merely aesthetic on my view, but I accept this as one possibility for how things could turn out if gender is reconstituted. (Belinsky 2019; Cull 2024)

⁵³ (Ashley 2023: 1057)

results from a non-deterministic, phenomenological synthesis of one's gender subjectivity. These processes are generally spontaneous and pre-reflective.

Gender subjectivity plays a role in understanding what it means for gender to be left open-ended, and in particular the idea that part of what this means is allowing individuals to practically determine what gendered traits and categories mean for them. While individuals may make these self-determinations consciously and deliberately, these meanings can also emerge from the particular ways in which someone's gendered lens is configured through socialization and exposure to gender terms, concepts, images, or other schemas. As emphasized in connection to coherence pressure, there are very many traits and behaviors that are bundled together under gender labels, and – for whatever contingent reason – different elements may carry more weight for different individuals in the development of their gendered lens. Likewise, different individuals may take different images, models, or experiences to be paradigmatic of a gender category. For these and other reasons, different individuals may develop different gendered lenses that produce differences in gender subjectivity, and which lead them to interpret gendered traits, terms, and categories in different ways.

To be clear, I do not take Ashley's account to be universally applicable: not everyone has gendered experiences, and not everyone has a gender identity in Ashley's sense. But, importantly, I think many people do have gendered experiences that help shape the phenomenological quality of their experiences, their sense of self, and what it means for them to live authentically. I flag this because, as indicated above, I think it is helpful for understanding one way in which individuals can arrive at divergent, personal interpretations of gender. But I also flag this because I want to emphasize that generating gender subjectivity is also part of what gender does in our world – even if this is, understandably, not the aspect that radical feminists tend to focus on.

Part of why it is understandable that radical feminists tend not to focus on gender subjectivity is because gender subjectivity need not – and, in fact, *does not* – always align with or reinforce hegemonic gender ideology. Consider Alison Stone's view that "women always acquire femininity by appropriating and reworking existing cultural interpretations of femininity."⁵⁴ These appropriations are not always acquiescent – sometimes, they are resistant. Frye, for instance, describes the slow process of changing oneself "from 'women' as culturally

⁵⁴ (Stone 2004: 135)

defined to ‘women’ as we define ourselves.”⁵⁵ A woman might, for instance, come to define herself as a woman partly by reference to her strength and intelligence; with time, she might even come to experience these traits as feminine. This is so even though strength and intelligence are not part of the ideological conception of femininity; her redefinition of herself as a woman is counter-hegemonic. Likewise, gender feels can also be understood as part of gender subjectivity, and— as clearly evidenced by trans, queer, and gender non-conforming people— individuals can and do have gender feels that go against normative expectations. Thus, even under conditions of coercive normative enforcement, an individual’s gendered lens need not be in sync with or reinforce the dominant ideological perspective, and may indeed be resistant or counter-hegemonic. There is thus reason to expect even greater divergence from the hegemonic norm if we eliminate the coercive pressures that police conformity.

Given that generating gender subjectivity is part of what gender does, the total elimination view can be understood as aiming to eliminate gender subjectivity, in addition to eliminating gender norms, roles, etc. Indeed, this is part of Weltman’s characterization of what eliminating gender would entail. Yet when we consider the oppressive elements of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism, it appears that we can eliminate those oppressive elements without needing to eliminate gender subjectivity. Gender reconstituted under a principle of gender self-determination appears to be compatible both with eliminating the oppressive elements of gender and with the persistence of gender subjectivity. This suggests that justice does not require the total elimination of gender.

6. Conclusion

I have argued that reconstituting gender along the lines of gender self-determination is plausibly compatible with eliminating the oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism. Reconstituting gender does not require the elimination of gender subjectivity, or of gender terms and concepts, and so does not require the total elimination of gender. This provides theoretical support for rejecting the idea that justice requires the total elimination view of gender. At the very least, it provides good theoretical reason to be skeptical of the total elimination view as a view about what justice requires. Given that the total elimination view is on shaky grounds as a view of justice, and that there are significant pragmatic reasons that speak against accepting the total elimination view, I thus conclude that we should not accept the total elimination view. We should not believe that justice requires the

⁵⁵ (Frye 1983: 37)

total elimination of gender, and we should not accept that the ultimate aim of gender liberation movements should be to totally eliminate gender.

Instead, I think that we should embrace a vision of abolition that seeks to radically reconstitute gender. There is a clear argument for the deconstructive aspect of gender reconstitution – we should, as Vedder argues, unbundle gender, and seek to eliminate the oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism. On the positive side, I have focused on a vision of gender reconstitution along the lines of gender self-determination. This positive vision allows that some individuals might continue to have gendered experiences, develop gender identities, and find meaning or utility in gender terms and concepts.

To be clear, I do not want to claim that this is the only way that we might imagine reconstituting gender in liberatory ways.⁵⁶ I am also not committed to the empirical claim that, if we eliminate conditions of gender oppression and successfully unbundle gender, some individuals will persist in having gendered experiences (and so on). It is possible that, under such conditions, individuals will cease to develop gendered lenses or gender subjectivity, and that individuals will no longer have a need for gender terms, concepts, categories, or identities. In that case, successfully pursuing gender reconstitution may actually end up giving rise to the total elimination of gender. But if that is the case, note that this means that there is no practical need to aim for total elimination or to believe that justice requires the total elimination of gender – it would suffice to aim for gender reconstitution, and we could get gender elimination for free. On the other hand, it is also possible that things would turn out otherwise: gender subjectivity may persist, and individuals may continue to find meaning or utility in gender terms, concepts, categories, or identities. But then, insofar as gender reconstituted lacks the oppressive elements that we have been concerned about, there is no need to seek the elimination of phenomena that form a central part of individuals' sense of self, or that they find meaning or utility in.

At present, there are many individuals for whom gender terms, concepts, and identities are of central importance. The total elimination view suggests that this is a problem for justice. In doing so, it facilitates thinking that such individuals are impediments to justice, which threatens to impair our moral relations, and particularly endangers trans people in contexts of widespread transphobia. I have suggested that the total elimination view overreaches in its

⁵⁶ Although I do think that, so long as some individuals do have gender feels, those feels should be respected.

characterization of what justice requires: even if we should eliminate all of the oppressive features of gender that have motivated gender abolitionism, this does not require totally eliminating gender. If those, like Weltman, who predict that the deconstructive project will naturally result in the elimination of gender subjectivity are correct, then pursuing gender reconstitution will have the result they wish without needing to view gender subjectivity as a target for elimination. On the other hand, if those, like Cull, who think that gender subjectivity would persist even after the deconstructive project are correct, then we can embrace a version of gender abolition that radically reconstitutes gender without seeking to eliminate gender subjectivity. In either case, we need not and should not view gender identity or gender subjectivity as something that needs to be eliminated in the name of justice, and we need not strive to eliminate gender terms and concepts.

Far from viewing trans people as impediments to justice, we should follow the lead of queer and trans theorists and activists who have been actively working to unbundle hegemonic gender roles and undo coercive practices of gender enforcement, while also offering a positive vision of gender reconstitution along the lines of gender self-determination.

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