

Visions of Gender Abolition: Against Total Elimination*

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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.

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¹ For example, (Connell 2003; Escalante 2018, June 14, 2024; Firestone 1971; Haslanger 2000; Laboria Cuboniks ; Lawford-Smith 2020; Rubin 1975; Weltman 2024; Wittig 2013)

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.

In this paper, I argue that we should not embrace a *total elimination view* of gender abolition. In particular, I will distinguish between external and internal dimensions of gender, and 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 internal dimensions of gender, which includes 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, and to refrain from setting the total elimination of gender as the ultimate aim of our gender liberation movements.

Setting My Target

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. But to do that, I will first lay out various phenomena that I take to fall under the umbrella of gender.

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

A Multitudinous View of Gender

At the structural level, gender takes the form of ideology (or culture) and connected social practices. Ideology encompasses beliefs, images, scripts, concepts, norms, and other schemas that are widespread, action-guiding, and play a role in coordinating social behavior.³ A central part of dominant gender ideology, for instance, is the belief that there are exactly two, mutually exclusive genders – men and women – that correspond to a natural division among humans along the lines of biological sex. There are also norms and scripts for how men and women should behave and interact with each other; images of what men and women do and should look like; and beliefs and expectations as to the traits that men and women do or should have. Altogether, these schemas carve out comprehensive, hegemonic gender roles for men and women. Gender at the structural level also includes social practices, such as a gendered division of labor, that are guided and rationalized by ideology, while also helping to reinforce and shape ideology. Gender ideology and practices oppress women, queer, and gender non-conforming individuals, establishing asymmetric power relationships.

At the interpersonal level, gender ideology and social practices shape individual behavior and interaction. 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.⁴ 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 play the role of woman; likewise, individuals assigned male are expected to conform to masculine norms, and, broadly, play the

³ I am here drawing on Haslanger’s notion of ideology and culture. (Haslanger 2017)

⁴ For an introduction to this issue, see (Mulkey et al. 2021)

role of man.⁵ Individuals are policed – often violently – for failing to conform to their assigned norms and roles. Being identified as a woman, or man, triggers the application of ideological scripts and norms that shape interpersonal interactions. These norm-governed interpersonal interactions contribute to gender oppression.

At the individual level, gender includes the ways that individuals are shaped by the structural and interpersonal levels.⁶ Individuals respond to gender schemas in diverse ways – internalizing, adapting, or contesting them. Gender also often shapes individuals’ bodies, movements, attitudes, and sense of self. Frye and Young both, for instance, draw attention to the ways in which gender norms often lead women to become physically smaller and more constrained.⁷ Further, on a more psychological level, Ashley offers an account on which, as a result of being steeped in gender ideology and practices, many individuals 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... and so on.”⁸ On Ashley’s account, *gender subjectivity* refers to the totality of one’s gendered experiences, and *gender identity* results from a non-deterministic, phenomenological synthesis of one’s gender subjectivity, a processes that is generally spontaneous and pre-reflective. Relatedly, Briggs and George offer an account of gender feels, or “attitude[s] or disposition[s]

⁵ For variations of this general idea, see, for instance, (Ásta 2018; Beauvoir 2011; Frye 1983; Haslanger 2012; Hester 2018; Laboria Cuboniks ; Rubin 1975).

⁶ The division between levels is not a hard one, and there are looping relationships between them.

⁷ (Frye 1983; Young 1980)

⁸ (Ashley 2023: 1057)

about the fact or possibility of one's possessing [a gendered] trait."⁹ For example, one may wish to grow facial hair, like wearing high heels, and believe one is a man.

As this sketch illustrates, I will be taking gender to encompass various phenomena, which I will roughly divide into two main camps: (1) external dimensions of gender (e.g. gender norms, roles, and hierarchies), or dimensions of gender related to one's social positioning, and (2) internal dimensions of gender (e.g. gendered phenomenology and gender feels), or dimensions of gender related to one's internal attitudes and self-conception.¹⁰ Radical feminists have, understandably, tended to focus on gender norms and roles, as this is what is most closely tied to gender oppression, and often take gender to be exhausted by or reducible to its external dimensions.¹¹ But, given that many people are interested in the internal dimensions of gender, I will also include gender subjectivity under the umbrella of gender, and will not assume that this is necessarily reducible to the external dimensions of gender.¹²

The Total Elimination View-1

I provide this overview to distinguish different varieties of abolition that one may endorse. Perhaps the most obvious form of abolition is the kind that seeks to eliminate all gendered phenomena. I will call this the *total elimination view*, to emphasize that it endorses comprehensively eliminating all gendered phenomena, and in particular, comprehensively eliminating both the internal and the external dimensions of gender.¹³ We can find a representation of the total elimination view in Weltman's description of gender abolition:

⁹ (Briggs and George 2023: 38)

¹⁰ Cf. (Barnes 2020; Bilgrami 2006; Jenkins 2016)

¹¹ See, for example, (Gheaus 2023; Lawford-Smith 2020).

¹² My view of gender reconstitution will sketch out a way in which gender subjectivity, or the internal aspects of gender, could come apart from the external aspects of gender, and particularly from socially-imposed gender norms and roles.

¹³ One exception might be gendered concepts, so long as they are not applied to actual human beings. The total eliminativist (as I am conceiving of them) might be okay with preserving the

[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.¹⁴

Weltman’s characterization of gender abolition is an eliminativist one, and in particular, one that seeks to eliminate a comprehensive range of phenomena: gender norms, gender roles, gender identities, gender-specific institutional spaces or statuses, and the ascription of gender terms to individuals. The proposal is not limited to external dimensions of gender, but also includes internal dimensions of gender.

Not all views of gender abolition in the literature are total elimination views, however. For one, some abolitionist views are not eliminativist in spirit, but instead emphasize proliferation rather than elimination. For instance, Hester, a member of Laboria Cuboniks, indicates that the kind of abolitionist world they are interested in is a “*multiply* gendered world.”¹⁵ Likewise, Matthew Cull argues that the only plausible version of gender abolition is one that proliferates, rather than eliminates, gender categories.¹⁶

But even among eliminativist approaches, not all emphasize a total elimination of gender. Firestone, for instance, focuses on radical material transformations that would eliminate the gendered division of labor, gender-based segregation, and all policing of sexuality, with the aim of establishing economic independence for women and children.¹⁷

Firestone’s vision is largely silent on internal dimensions of gender such as gender identities or

language of gender to talk about a gendered past. Thus, I am limiting my discussion to what Cull refers to as *metaphysical abolition*, in contrast to *conceptual abolition*. (Cull 2024: 158-59)

¹⁴ (Weltman 2024: 511-12)

¹⁵ (Hester 2018: 30) Emphasis in original.

¹⁶ (Cull 2024)

¹⁷ (Firestone 1971)

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.¹⁸ 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.”¹⁹ These views identify external elements of gender as being in need of elimination, but do not speak to the internal dimensions of gender.

Thus, there are widely differing visions of gender abolition; not all are focused on elimination, and of those that are focused on elimination, not all are total elimination views.

Initial Arguments Against the Total Elimination View

My central aim is to make plausible that justice does not require the total elimination of gender-- and specifically, that it does not require eliminating internal dimensions of gender. I will do so by showing that there is at least one form of gender abolition that plausibly eliminates the oppressive aspects of gender by eliminating the external dimensions of gender and radically transforming the internal dimensions.

But before I move on to developing the central argument, I want to review some existing arguments about the total elimination view, particularly in connection to the internal dimensions of gender.

¹⁸ (Wright 2012: 405)

¹⁹ (Laboria Cuboniks: 0x0E)

Cull argues against a total elimination view of gender abolition 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.²⁰ 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.²¹ 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.²² Moreover, Cull argues that the total elimination view endangers trans individuals by making gender identifications socially undesirable, because “if one seeks a society in which it is undesirable for trans women to have an extremely important part of their identities, then one seeks a society in which trans women are unwelcome.”²³ Making trans people unwelcome, in turn, increases their risk of violence and endangers trans lives, particularly in contexts of widespread transphobia. Thus, since eliminating gender categories and positioning gender identification as undesirable would wrong and endanger individuals with strongly held gender identities, this suggests that justice cannot require the total elimination of gender.

²⁰ (Cull 2019; Kapusta 2016)

²¹ (Cull 2019: 9)

²² Note that Weltman thinks that if we eliminate gender categories, then 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. Cull, in contrast, 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. Thanks to Daniel Weltman [Redact] for pressing me on this point.

²³ Note that this argument also applies to cis individuals with strongly held gender identities. (Cull 2019: 10)

Weltman replies that Cull's argument merely shows that we should hold off on eliminating gender categories.²⁴ 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 or endangering anyone.

There are two points that I want to flag about this exchange. First, in the background of Cull and Weltman's exchange is a disagreement about whether it is possible to create conditions where there are no longer people who identify with a gender category, without resorting to violence or imposing significant harms. Cull finds this highly implausible, whereas Weltman is much more optimistic. In particular, Weltman suggests that eliminating the oppressive conditions under which these identities have been forged would ultimately make gender identities recede in importance, enabling these identities to fade away. Cull, on the other hand, is skeptical about the possibility of creating conditions under which the internal dimensions of gender fade away. Given that both positions involve speculation about circumstances quite different from our own, I will remain agnostic about this question in this paper.²⁵

The second point that I want to flag is that neither Cull nor Weltman go into detail about why we should or should not think that the internal dimensions of gender are themselves a problem for justice. For instance, another response someone might give to Cull, suggested by Lawford-Smith's arguments for abolition, is that while Cull is right that eliminating gender categories would harm some people, this is ultimately the lesser evil, given the oppressiveness

²⁴ (Weltman 2024)

²⁵ However, I think that remaining agnostic about this issue has significant implications for how we should regard the total elimination view. I will return to this issue later in the paper.

of gender categories.²⁶ Cull does not address, and thereby does not assuage, concerns about the inherent oppressiveness of gender categories.²⁷ They maintain that “we do not need the absence of gender, we just need the absence of gendered oppression. We need to do gender differently.”²⁸ While I ultimately agree with Cull, this response on its own does not speak to the concern that there is no way to do gender that does not reproduce what is oppressive about gender. On the other hand, while Weltman includes internal dimensions of gender on the list of what ought to be eliminated, his support for the abolitionist position references arguments that appeal to gender inequality and the oppressiveness of gender norms. This leaves open whether the internal dimensions of gender are necessarily oppressive.²⁹

My argument against the total elimination view will address this issue directly. I will consider in detail what the oppressive features of gender that have largely motivated gender abolitionism are, and sketch an alternative vision of abolition that does away with these oppressive features while allowing for the maintenance of internal dimensions of gender (albeit radically transformed). This suggests that the internal dimensions of gender are not necessarily oppressive, and hence that we need not seek to eliminate them – or to bring about a world in which they no longer exist – in the name of justice.

²⁶ (Lawford-Smith 2020)

²⁷ Cull does respond to some concerns about gender categories and gender identities – for instance, that gender categories are hierarchical and totalizing, and that gender identities create deviant spaces, and thereby are necessarily tied up with marginalization and violence. Cull responds by saying that we can define gender categories in non-hierarchical ways; avoid using gender categories in totalizing ways; and avoid the marginalization and violence of gender normativity by allowing for the creation of new identities that widen the space of permissible behavior. However, these responses do not address the deeper concern that there is no way of having non-oppressive gender categories; likewise, the response to the problem of marginalization does not address cases in which individuals are shut out of an identity that they claim, and do not wish to create a new identity. (Cull 2024: 140-43, 64-68)

²⁸ (Cull 2024: 143)

²⁹ Some have suggested that this is the case by understanding gender identity or gender categories as being ultimately reducible to, or necessarily dependent on, oppressive gender norms. See, for instance, (Gheaus 2023; Lawford-Smith 2020).

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 three categories, corresponding to concerns about freedom, justice, and equality, respectively.

The concerns about freedom generally have to do with the ways that individuals are coercively forced into all-encompassing gender roles. Gender categories, norms, and roles are non-consensually imposed on individuals from birth.³⁰ Further, these norms and roles come with significant, including violent, sanctions that coercively enforce gender conformity.³¹ Individuals are policed for gender conformity both synchronically (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).³² Further, gender

³⁰ For arguments that appeal to the harmful imposition of gender on individuals in motivating abolition, see for instance (Bey 2022; Gheaus 2023; Lawford-Smith 2020)

³¹ For arguments that appeal especially to the violent and coercive nature of gender in motivating abolition, see for instance (Escalante June 14, 2024; Wright 2012)

³² The diachronic element is related to what Bettcher terms identity enforcement and reality enforcement. See, for instance, (Bettcher 2007, 2014)

norms and roles are all-encompassing in a way that is unjustified and objectionable.³³ 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.³⁴ 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 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.³⁵ 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

³³ (Vedder Forthcoming) argues that we should abolish these practices because they objectionably constraint individual autonomy.

³⁴ (Bell 2025)

³⁵ 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).

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 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 frivolous.³⁶ 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.

Closely related to the concerns about freedom and equality are concerns about justice. Gender norms and roles unjustifiably differentiate individuals based on sexual characteristics, “judg[ing] the goodness of human beings and their behaviors to depend, in part of their sexual characteristics.”³⁷ In this way, gender norms and roles create unjust double standards, unjustly regulate individuals, and unjustly distribute power based on bodily traits that do not warrant these differentiations.³⁸ One could also add the devaluing and stigmatization of femininity— as well as, we might add, queer-coded traits— to concerns about justice. To the extent that queer- and feminine-coded traits and behaviors are morally unobjectionable, it appears unjustified to marginalize and stigmatize individuals on the basis of exhibiting those traits and behaviors.³⁹

³⁶ Serano, for instances, understands ‘traditional sexism’ in terms of the devaluing of women and femininity. (Serano 2009)

³⁷ (Gheaus 2023: 38). Gheaus also makes the point that some gender norms sanction immoral behavior.

³⁸ Bey shares this concern, and takes it to be parallel to unjust racial norms and roles based on skin color and other bodily traits. For this reason, Bey sees the abolition of race and gender as going together. (Bey 2022; Gheaus 2023; Laboria Cuboniks 2015; Wasserstrom 1980)

³⁹ There could be some feminine or queer-coded behaviors that are morally objectionable, such that it is justified to stigmatize people for engaging in those behaviors.

Although I have separated out these concerns for presentational purposes, 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, as Frye has argued, tying gender norms and roles to bodily features helps to create the illusion that these social divisions are natural and thereby justified.⁴⁰ Coherence pressure further helps to maintain the illusion that gender categories map on to natural kinds: by corralling 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.⁴¹ Thus, the practices that motivate the freedom- and justice-centered concerns help to rationalize and justify the practices that motivate the equality-centered concerns. Further, Frye argues that 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.⁴²

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.

Abolition as Reconstitution

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

⁴⁰ (Frye 1983: 33)

⁴¹ This point is made nicely by (Frye 1983: 34). See also (Fields and Fields 2012).

⁴² (Frye 1983: 33)

- 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, unjust distribution of power and resources based on gender (or on traits taken to be evidence of one's "proper" gender role)
- Unfair, unjustified double standards based on sexual characteristics, or bodily traits thought to indicate sexual characteristics
- Unjustified devaluation or stigmatization of feminine and queer-coded traits and behaviors

Let us take for granted that we should accept a vision of gender abolition that eliminates all of these oppressive aspects of gender. Does this commit us to a total elimination view of gender abolition?

It is clear that eliminating the oppressive aspects of gender requires eliminating the external dimensions of gender. To eliminate the forced assignment to all-encompassing gender roles, the coercive enforcement of gender norms, the unjustified double standard based on sexual characteristics, and so on is effectively to eliminate gender norms and assigned gender roles altogether.⁴³ Further, I will take for granted that dismantling gender hierarchies will

⁴³ There could be an exception here, if one allows (as my discussion in the next section will show) that there can be gender norms that are not based on sexual characteristics— for example, gender norms that say that if you display gendered behavior X you should also display gendered behavior Y. Such a norm would not fall prey to the concern about unjustly discriminating based on sex, and so some might think that such a norm is non-oppressive, so long as it is not violently enforced or coercively imposed (e.g. one could feasibly avoid X-ing or Y-ing, and thus avoid the norm). However, as I will discuss, such a norm might still trigger concerns about objectionable coherence pressure. Some might allow that some coherence pressure is acceptably non-oppressive, as long as it is not too comprehensive. I will be

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. Thus, I will assume in what follows that any plausible version of gender abolition will require significant material transformations, including eliminating the gender division of labor, as well as eliminating all other external dimensions of gender that are socially imposed on individuals – including, in particular, eliminating assigned gender roles and norms. The question that remains, then, is whether abolition also requires eliminating all aspects of the internal dimensions of gender.

I will suggest that eliminating the oppressive aspects of gender does not require eliminating all internal dimensions of gender, but that it does require radically transforming the internal dimensions of gender such that they do not impose coherence pressure, generate inequality, introduce unjustified double standards based on biology, or otherwise coerce individuals into particular ways of being. I will frame this form of abolition, following R.W. Connell, as a “reconstitution on new bases.”⁴⁴ Connell is interested in whether aspects or products of gender can be “disconnected from the structure of inequality... reconstituted in unmurderous forms.”⁴⁵ She suggests that central to the reconstitution of gender would be to do away with the fundamental sense that “gender is fatality.”⁴⁶ This sense of fatality arises most clearly from the myriad ways in which the shape of one’s body (one’s sex assignment) determines how one’s life should go under the regime of gender. But the comprehensiveness of gender norms and the weight of coherence pressure also adds to the sense in which gender is

assuming, for the sake of argument, that even relatively small amounts of coherence pressure are objectionably oppressive.

⁴⁴ (Connell 2003: 278).

⁴⁵ (Connell 2003: 280)

⁴⁶ (Connell 2003: 282)

fatality – it is difficult to live freely if one must choose between adopting whole, pre-made packages of expression and being.

I will take up Connell’s idea of reconstituting gender in unmurderous forms by sketching an approach to the internal dimensions of gender that is focused on undoing gender as fatality. The approach that I will take, drawing on work by trans theorists and activists, is one that reconstitutes the internal dimensions of gender along a principle of radical gender self-determination.⁴⁷ Reconstituting the internal dimensions of gender in this way, while also eliminating the external dimensions of gender, plausibly offers a version of gender abolition that eliminates the oppressive features of gender.⁴⁸

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*.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ 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)

⁴⁸ 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 ; Cull 2024)

⁴⁹ 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

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 exhibit behaviors expected of women, to not identify as a woman, etc.

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

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.⁵⁰ 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-extensive with the category *female*). 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 coherence pressure and eliminating gender norms of all kinds, including body-behavior, body-category, behavior-category, category-category, and body-behavior-category gender norms. This is deconstructive insofar as it separates different gendered components (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 thus entails eliminating gender norms and roles. More broadly, it 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 gender norms.

Gender Self-Determination

Following the negative aspect of gender reconstitution, the positive aspect reconstitutes gender along a principle of gender self-determination. This is a radical break from our gender

⁵⁰ (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.”

practices, while simultaneously being continuous with how gender has operated in our world along the internal dimensions.

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.⁵¹ Gender self-determination is sometimes understood as allowing individuals to choose which gender categories, if any, they want to be sorted into.⁵² While, on my picture, individuals are allowed to select their gender category labels (or to opt out of being labeled by gender altogether), it is not merely a matter of choosing which hegemonic role one wants to be slotted into; again, the deconstructive aspect of gender reconstitution involves eliminating gender roles as traditionally understood.

Rather, the sense of gender self-determination I have in mind is more radical. 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 generally respected.

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 both accepting the introduction of neogenders, and allowing traditional gender categories (or all gender categories) to fade away. What categories there are, if any, depends on whether individuals chose to adopt the corresponding category labels.

⁵¹ (Serano 2009: 193)

⁵² This is, for instance, how Briggs and George primarily seem to characterize gender self-determination. (Briggs and George 2023)

Second, the open-endedness of gender self-determination also includes allowing individuals to practically determine what gendered traits and categories mean for them, and, within moral limits, respecting these determinations.⁵³ 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 at all).⁵⁴ It also allows individuals to move fluidly between gendered traits and categories, and to recombine traits, behaviors, and categories over time.⁵⁵ Broadly, adhering to a principle of

⁵³ These determinations do not need to be respected if they involve harming others.

⁵⁴ Note, then, that on this view someone can take, e.g., having breasts to be part of what it means for them to be or feel like a woman. But at the same time, the view also allows that someone else can take having breasts to have nothing to do with being a woman. The view allows self-determined links between traits, but not normative links that are coercively imposed on one by society. Thank you to an anonymous referee for pressing me on this point.

⁵⁵ 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

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 emphasize, treating gender categories as *irreducible*.⁵⁶ 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.⁵⁷ 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. Radical gender self-determination allows each individual to determine their gender category, and different categories may feel correct to different individuals for different reasons.

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'

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)

⁵⁶ (Briggs and George 2023)

⁵⁷ (Briggs and George 2023: 15)

gender feels – so long as doing so does not require acting immorally or tolerating immoral behavior – and, where feasible, engaging in gender affirmation.⁵⁸ Briggs and George characterize a gender feel as “an attitude or disposition about the fact or possibility of one’s possessing [a gendered] trait.”⁵⁹ Respecting someone’s gender feels involves generally assuming that they are sincere, competent, and coherent in reporting their gender feels, treating them as they want to be treated, and engaging with them from a place of moral respect.⁶⁰ This includes granting individuals the autonomy to act on their gender feels and to express themselves freely without fear of violence or sanctions.

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.”⁶¹ 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, depending on the person, have multiple different 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

⁵⁸ This framework also draws heavily on Bettcher’s work on ethical first-person authority. See (Bettcher 2009)

⁵⁹ (Briggs and George 2023: 38)

⁶⁰ (Briggs and George 2023: 101-05)

⁶¹ (Hernandez 2021: 621)

attention in our interactions with others.⁶² 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 and appropriate within the bounds of the relationship, seeing them on their own terms and treating them accordingly.

To summarize, the form of gender reconstitution that I have outlined involves a deconstructive process that severs the normative ties between traditionally gendered traits, allowing instead for a principle of gender self-determination that leaves gender terms, categories, and traits open to individual adoption and re-interpretation. Gender reconstitution eliminates the external dimensions of gender, while also radically transforming the internal dimensions of gender.

Continuity & Departure

Gender reconstituted along the lines of gender self-determination departs radically from gender as it has existed. It is gender without hierarchy, 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.

Some may wonder how we can retain internal dimensions of gender without falling back on hegemonic gender ideology and practices. Gheaus, for instance, argues that there is no legitimate claim to the recognition of one's gender identity, because doing so would require upholding unjust gender norms.⁶³ As part of this argument, Gheaus considers different ways of

⁶² 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).

⁶³ (Gheaus 2023)

understanding gender identity. The problem arises because these are largely defined in terms of gender norms (e.g. internalizing certain gender norms or aspiring to be held to certain gender norms).

Briggs and George's account of gender feels, as well as Ashley's account of gender subjectivity, help show how the internal dimensions of gender can be understood independently of gender norms. In order to have a gender feel, one needs to (1) interpret some trait as a gendered trait, and (2) have an attitude or disposition toward the possibility of one's having that trait. Neither (1) nor (2) invokes a gender norm. A gender norm dictates that, for some gendered traits X and Y, X and Y ought (not) to be paired. But neither (1) nor (2) makes, or depends on, any such normative restriction on how traits ought or ought not co-vary.

Now, one might think that the very idea of a gendered trait smuggles in problematic gender norms. For instance, one might think that what it is for a trait to be gendered just is for it to be ideologically associated with a particular sex. We can grant that, in our current context, many people understand traits to be gendered in association with a particular sex. But this need not be the case. Again, 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.

One might then wonder how agents come to subjectively interpret something as gendered, and how this could possibly diverge from, and thus do anything but reproduce, hegemonic gender practices. I think that Ashley's account of gender subjectivity provides resources for explaining how there can be diverse and non-normative experiences of gendered subjectivity even under current conditions. Again, on Ashley's view, individuals have gendered experiences insofar as they develop a gendered phenomenological lens for interpreting their

experiences.⁶⁴ This gendered lens is configured through socialization and exposure to gender terms, concepts, images, models, etc. Even in our social context, where gender expression is heavily constrained, individuals develop different understandings of what it means to be a woman (e.g.) and embody femininity in different ways. As Gheaus notes, “one [can] display various kinds of femininity: reserved, playful, or cheeky; rather emotional or rather distant and dignified, etc.”⁶⁵ As a result, different individuals have different histories of socialization in gender terms, images, and meanings; they have different models and experiences of gender. For this reason, different elements may carry more weight for different individuals in the development of their gendered lens – different individuals may take different images, models, traits, or experiences to be paradigmatic of a gender category.⁶⁶ This can explain how and why different individuals could develop different gendered lenses, and therefore how people could, and do, come to have diverse interpretations of gendered traits and non-normative combinations of gender feels. That it is possible for individuals to interpret gendered terms and traits (and have gender feels) that go against the norm seems clearly evidenced by trans, queer, and gender non-conforming people.

Further, other feminist work also suggests that how one understands femininity or womanhood 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.”⁶⁷ These appropriations are not always acquiescent – sometimes, they are resistant. Indeed, Frye

⁶⁴ 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.

⁶⁵ (Gheaus 2023: 33)

⁶⁶ I do not want to claim that this discussion is comprehensive, I just want to say enough to make the idea plausible. Other helpful related work here includes (Bell 2025)

⁶⁷ (Stone 2004: 135)

describes the slow process of changing oneself “from ‘women’ as culturally defined to ‘women’ as we define ourselves.”⁶⁸ 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. 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. This helps to show that gender subjectivity does not depend on oppressive gender norms. The internal dimensions of gender, transformed by a principle of radical gender self-determination, do not just smuggle oppressive gender norms back into the picture.

Gender reconstituted is, thus, gender stripped of the oppressive elements that feminists have been concerned about. Insofar as gender is fundamentally understood as an oppressive system, 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 gender reconstitution 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.⁶⁹ Thus, although gender reconstituted along the

⁶⁸ (Frye 1983: 37)

⁶⁹ 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

lines of gender self-determination represents a radical, abolitionist departure from gender, it is also continuous with gender in some significant ways. In particular, it retains – or more accurately, allows for the retention of – some of the internal dimensions of gender, albeit in a radically transformed form.

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 all aspects of the internal dimensions of gender, 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 further, that there are significant pragmatic concerns about the risks that pursuing the total elimination view poses, particularly for vulnerable people, I conclude that we should not accept the total elimination view.⁷⁰ [FN] We should not believe that justice requires the total elimination of gender, and we should not set the total elimination of gender as the ultimate aim of gender liberation movements.

To be clear, I do not want to claim that this is the only way that we might reconstitute gender in liberatory ways.⁷¹ I am also not committed to the empirical claim that, if we eliminate conditions of gender oppression and successfully unbundle gender, some individuals will

‘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)

⁷⁰ For some relevant pragmatic arguments, see (Cull 2019; Earp 2021; Weltman 2024)

⁷¹ Although I do think that, so long as some individuals do have gender feels, those feels should be respected.

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, then this means that there is no practical need to aim for total elimination – 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 many individuals' sense of self, or that they find meaning or utility in.

I conclude that 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. Rather than embracing a vision of abolition that eliminates all gendered phenomena, we should set our sights on eliminating the external dimensions of gender and radically reconstituting the internal dimensions along the lines of gender self-determination.

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