Book Review

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What Gender Should Be, by Matthew J. Cull, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2024, pp. 234.

In this book, Matthew Cull asks what concepts of gender and gender identity it would be good for us to have. Current gender concepts have deleterious effects: they constrain us and cause ontological injustice and misgendering (pp. 26–9). So we need new concepts that can aid liberation and alter consciousnesses (pp. 48–58). Cull's proposal is gender pluralism: gender terms ought to have multiple meanings, across and even within contexts (pp. 84–5). What meanings they ought to have is "a matter of weighing the moral, political and pragmatic reasons for each concept, and using the one that comes out best by such lights in the circumstances" (p. 176). Cull defends pluralism in three ways. First, they argue that concept choice has practical upshots. Second, they attack alternatives to pluralism: monism and eliminativism. Third, they respond to objections to pluralism.

The first question Cull poses is why we should bother with this project. If the goal is to change the world, shouldn't we focus on practical concerns instead of concepts? They respond that when it comes to the social world, concepts can change the world, because how we understand concepts influences our actions (pp. 41–6). Cull gives examples like how the elimination of customary rights (a conceptual change) played a role in dispossessing rural English workers of their land (pp. 41–2), and how knowledge of concepts changes how people act (via

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looping effects) (pp. 43–6). Thus if you care about changing the social world, you should care about changing concepts. Cull also argues that we should read Marx as accepting both realism about social facts (p. 36) and the causal efficacy of ideological aspects of society (p. 38–41).

In defense of pluralism, Cull claims monistic concepts of gender are over- and under-inclusive, especially with respect to demigender people, and fail to account for some genderfluid people (pp. 73–81). Some monistic concepts entail that one can be more or less of a gender, which creates an "implicit and potentially troubling hierarchy" (p. 82). Pluralism about gender is thus preferable. A gender concept like "man" ought to mean whatever it would be best for it to mean, and there is no single thing that it would be best for it to mean, even in just one context, let alone every context (p. 89).

Against the worry that pluralism destroys the possibility of a unified feminism, Cull replies that we can be feminists without a unified vision of women, and that even if we need a unified view, the unification can be disjunctive—a simple concatenation of the various meanings (pp. 98–100). Moreover, there have always been differences among women and rejecting pluralism will not change that (pp. 100–1); a unified feminist vision is a product of consciousness raising rather than something automatically generated by a unified concept of women (pp. 101–2); and the point of solidarity is to unify people across differences (pp. 102–3).

Against the objection that pluralism renders a sentence like "X and Y are both men" nonsensical, because we have a different concept of "man" for X than we do for "Y," Cull argues that copredication, according to which polysemous terms are used in multiple senses at the same time, is commonplace and unobjectionable (pp. 103–5). The gender pluralist is not asking us to do what we don't already do with other concepts, like when we say "Seattle has a million inhabitants and outlawed smoking in bars last year"—"Seattle" refers both to a geographical location and a municipal body, and we can do the same with gender terms (pp. 104–5).

Cull closes by attacking eliminativism, the view that we should rid of gender rather than proliferate it. One kind of eliminativist is represented by thinkers like Shulamith Firestone, James Baldwin, and Mario Mieli. They defend the claim that humans are inherently androgynous and that an ideal society would eliminate gender to allow this androgyny to flourish. Cull offers a variety of replies. The two main ones are that these approaches would not lead to better consequences, because some people are attached to non–androgynous genders, and that they would stifle autonomy by mandating androgyny (pp. 150–3).

Cull then goes after contemporary eliminativism. They argue against these eliminativists that gender need not be inherently oppressive: we can develop new gender concepts that are not oppressive (p. 166). A society that doesn't harm people for deviating from gender norms is possible (p. 167). If people can make up new genders any time, there will be no need to eliminate gender in order to eliminate gender oppression (pp. 167–8). There is one form of eliminativism Cull does accept: elimination as *Aufheben*, which means getting rid of gender oppression, gendered division of labor, and other bad things, but keeping gendered aesthetics (pp. 168–70). Cull says this is equivalent to gender pluralism, and we should prefer the label "pluralism" over "eliminativism" because the latter is easy to misunderstand (pp. 171–2).

This is an excellent book on an important topic. In addition to the above-mentioned arguments, Cull defends a novel deflationary account of gender identity (pp. 110–26) and touches on smaller points, like a characterization of María Lugones's notion of social worlds as a way of glossing what Patricia Hill Collins has to say about controlling images (pp. 48–54) and a framework for categorizing eliminativisms as conceptual, metaphysical, or both (p. 158). One worry is that it covers a lot of ground and is more interested in sketching pluralism than thoroughly refuting opponents. For example, Cull objects to Mieli and other eliminativists who think expanded gender categories are only good for leading to androgyny by asking "what's wrong with a movement that doesn't treat such liberation as a stepping-stone, but instead treats it as an end goal in itself" (p. 137)? Mieli and his allies might suggest that this is like asking a socialist to treat unions as an end goal rather than a stepping stone to worker ownership of the means of production. To do so would be to miss the point of socialism, and Cull similarly might be accused of missing the point of Mieli, who at least receives a more thorough discussion than most of the book's opponents. There is thus room for further debate, and the book is likely to be a touchstone for future conversations.

A final worry: Cull's pluralism is flexible and context-sensitive so as to allow for whatever gender concepts are best. But flexibility and context-sensitivity don't guarantee the best concepts. We are not all equally situated in every context with respect to determining in what directions concepts flex. Contextualism often benefits the privileged and powerful in a context. What actually guarantees the best outcome is contextualism plus whatever other measures secure justice, freedom, and so on, such that the chosen concept is the best one. Cull's view risks collapsing into the platitude that whatever gender concepts a just society would pick are the right ones to have. Cull claims not to be doing ideal theory (p. 19) and argues that the goal is to develop workable

concepts for liberation now (p. 87). But there is no story for why pluralism will secure, rather than merely render possible, the right concepts. Cull rightly says that our present concepts are bad and should change (p. 118). But we have no reason to think a pluralist world will be much better unless we idealize it in ways Cull rejects.