

The Difficulty in Being a Woman:  
Gender's Role in Undermining Autonomy

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In the westernized world, places like the United States take a very individualistic approach to human rights. As an umbrella term, human rights embody not only legal rights, but also rights with moral status in society [Poe 8]. Authors such as James Griffin believe the right of autonomy is one of the highest level of human rights, but why? As children and education come into the picture, the discussion on autonomy widens; it is typically associated with the concept of self-governance. However, when it comes to the perceived gender of a person, the conversation seems to change. Thus illustrating that perhaps we have an incoherent understanding of what autonomy, as a concept, actually means, when we are changing the definition based on who we are talking about.

The purpose of this paper is to provide a coherent understanding of autonomy, discuss the problems surrounding the concepts of gender and gendering, draw parallels to the experiences of women, and then describe how the gendering of women is specifically affected by that definition of autonomy. First, I will be appealing to Thomas Hill's definition of autonomy as it encompasses key elements to a well-rounded definition. Second, when it comes to gender, there are many molds people conform to. Unfortunately, these molds typically reflect the binary understanding of gender, male or female, and impact how individuals may be constrained within their daily lives. So much so, that women have a difficult time forming their own identities because of it. I will argue that gendering ultimately undermines autonomy and most importantly, autonomy, as a right, must be upheld in everyone and to undermine it is morally wrong.

## **I. What is autonomy?**

Historically speaking, autonomy was used as a political angle so that states could go about their own affairs [Darwall 263]. As a moral angle, though, autonomy was heavily

discussed since the time of Socrates. Despite the attention given to individuals, autonomy has many different meanings, but its intent remains the same. Not only does autonomy possess intrinsic worth for the individual, but it relies on producing the most good, the promotion of well-being and the prevention of harm [Young 36]. Thus, a working definition of autonomy must be established<sup>1</sup>. To be fully autonomous, one must satisfy both the descriptive and normative components of self-control. The descriptive account gives the overall depiction of what an autonomous person is supposed to be, describes their nature, and specifically details the state of mind one must be in to have legitimate self-made thoughts, desires, and ideas, as well as how and when to express them. The normative accounts explain the duties of others in relation to one's autonomy. Specifically, other people have a duty to recognize and respect your autonomy, just as you must also recognize and respect theirs. Autonomy comes in degrees and everyone has the potential to act fully autonomously. No one's autonomy, no matter the degree it may be in, may not ethically, in any circumstance, be infringed upon. Both components are crucial to autonomy because they highlight the facts internal to the agent that render them capable of acting autonomously as well as the external circumstances that affect one's ability to actually be autonomous. The overall goal of incorporating descriptive and normative accounts is to allow an individual to be as autonomous as they possibly can be so that they can be happy and enjoy their lives. Just as John Stuart Mill argues, "individuals may be the best judges of what will really bring them pleasure" and their exercise of their personal autonomy will allow for personal benefits only the individual will find beneficial [265].

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<sup>1</sup> As a terminological note, I will be using "autonomy," "to be autonomous" and "to act autonomously" to describe different forms of autonomy. To be autonomous refers to self decision making, whereas acting autonomously refers to carrying out or acting upon those self-made decisions. There are two components to our concept of autonomy: a descriptive component and a normative component.

For my purposes in this paper, I will be adopting Thomas Hill's conception of autonomy from "Autonomy and Self-Respect." The definition Hill provides adequately summarizes the points many philosophers make when attempting to define autonomy and takes into account both the descriptive and normative claims to autonomy. His definition is one which provides a well-rounded understanding of autonomy by incorporating both descriptive and normative accounts, which are key to having a whole autonomous person. After Hill's working definition, I will go back and analyze each section to explain what they mean for the individual and why each part is important:

Let us say that persons have autonomy, or live autonomously, in a final sense if the following is true: (1) they have the psychological capacities for rational decision making which are associated with autonomy; (2) they actually use these capacities when they face important choice situations; (3) they have the right of autonomy discussed previously, ie a right to make morally and legally permissible decisions about matters deeply affecting their own lives free from threats and manipulation by others; (4) other people actually respect this right as well as their other rights; (5) they are able and disposed to have distinctly human values; (6) others respect this capacity by not presuming that they value only good experiences for themselves and by not counting their comfort as more important than their declared values; and finally (7) they have ample opportunities to make use of these conditions in living a life over which they have a high degree of control. [Hill 36]

For easy reference to these conditions they will be named as follows: (1) having rational decision making skills, (2) using rational decision making skills, (3) right to autonomy, (4) external

respect for one's right to autonomy, (5) having human values, (6) respecting individual human values, and (7) having the opportunity to exercise one through six. I will consider each in turn and then show how three of these are undermined by gender and gendering.

When it comes to psychological capacities for rational decision making, we are focusing on rational decisions made of one's own volition. Examples of decisions made by a non-autonomous person include children who do not question authority and those who have addictive behaviors and cannot stop even if they decide to, among others [31]. This does not mean that decisions must be free of all external or internal causal factors; in Kantian thought, autonomy in a psychological capacity means "one need not act independently of all causes and desires but only from certain causes and desires which interfere with rational choice" [31]. Causal determination need not be feared. The existence of causal or self determination does not necessarily mean that selves do not exist<sup>2</sup>. What must be avoided are determining factors that

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## <sup>2</sup> **The Self: The Bridge Between Autonomy and Gender**

Conceptions of autonomy are important for understanding our own self and identity. However, many critics have pointed out that multiple implications exist when one discusses being an autonomous person. For example, with Immanuel Kant initiating the conversation on moral truths, he takes autonomy of the will to mean having a set of self-imposed principles that have the ability to causally affect events without the motivation or urge to alter them, but then follow through on these actions[29]. Moral truths are truths of reason and "this implies that one is under moral obligation to do something if and only if it is required by the principles one accepts for oneself as a rational being free from determining causes and independently of all desire" [29-30]. Autonomy incorporates self-determination, however there exists several questions as to whether or not selves exist when one is unable to make their own decisions.

Marilyn Friedman takes this traditional worry and answers "obviously, if there were no selves, then there would be no selves who could determine themselves. Selves are entities whose actions must be explained partly in terms of intentional states that are ascribed to them. [31] Furthermore, the existence of individual selves must be accepted if universal moral practices are to also be accepted [33]. Without a self, there would be no concept of autonomy. However, along the lines of David Hume and his understanding of personal identity, the idea of a "continuous self" should be thought of. The idea of the "'soul,' the 'self,' and even of 'substance' results from our confusing a succession of perceptions with the idea of identity" [Murray]. The sense of self is created through individuals themselves in a universal semiotic process by which people manage inconsistency" [Murray]. Human beings live in a social environment which impacts their daily lives.

Some may say that the entire definition of autonomy must then be overhauled or reconceptualized in order to incorporate social and relational terms. This then renames autonomy to relational autonomy. There are two steps

coerce agents to make a decision they would not have originally made. As James Griffin believes, the “enemies of autonomy are “indoctrination, brainwashing, domination, manipulation, conformity, conventionality, false consciousness, certain forms of immaturity” [Griffin 151]. The point of autonomy is to act independently of certain attitudes which would deny original thought and decision making starting with the agent, rational decision making, however, occurs only in mature, reflective human beings [Hill 31]. A reflective agent is an agent who is able to distinguish between coercive and noncoercive attitudes. Self-reflection requires not only the distinction between manipulative behaviors, but decisions which are either good or bad for them as a normative agent. It is the good decisions that a self-reflective rational decision maker chooses to help better themselves and make their lives more worthwhile. However, it should be noted that self-reflection is a psychological tool acquired over time. Self-reflection requires continual effort and practice. In other words, just because one may be self-reflective one time, does not mean that one may be self-reflective all of the time. As Marilyn Friedman outlines, decisions and choices through self-reflection must “reflect, or mirror, the wants, desires, cares, concerns, values, and commitments that someone reaffirms when attending to them... .Choices and actions mirror wants and values by...aiming at the attainment of what is wanted or valued, promoting its well-being, or protecting it from harm” [6]. While it may be difficult to be self-reflective all of the time, it is more beneficial to the individual to be self-reflective than not.

After acquiring the psychological capacities to rationally make decisions through self-reflection, individuals who act autonomously (2) use those rational decision making skills. It

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which could be taken so that these social and relational terms are accounted for. Self-determination would be determined by other socially embedded selves and no longer up to the individual. Even in this regard though, it does not mean that selves necessarily do not exist [32].

is a trivial skill to have if it is never used. Furthermore, decisions are made all of the time, but it is the decisions which, when made with rational decision making skills, impact the life being lived in a more meaningful way because of their being not only our own, but because conscious thought was put into them. Both of these are under the protection of the (3) right to autonomy. Autonomy, as a right, is a right not to be interfered with and to be treated in certain ways. With autonomy as a right, individuals are free from certain influences, so that they can freely exercise their decision-making abilities when a decision needs to be made. Freedom of action could then have a formula which states that to be free, there must be no restraints of any kind “standing between a person and the carrying out of that person’s autonomously formed desires” [Christman 110]. As John Christman explains in his *Recent Work on the Concept of Autonomy*, autonomy is a right against undermining my psychological capacity [110]. For example, if a group of people are brainwashed or corrupted into believing a certain political candidate is the best option, their right to autonomy is violated because they’re unable to critically evaluate and reflect on their thoughts and desires in a rational manner [110]. Sometimes, however, my right to autonomy can be violated without my psychological capacity being violated. In those instances, my right has been disregarded “where I have been treated *as if* I had no PC [psychological capacity]-autonomy or without sufficient *respect* for my PC-autonomy” [110]. In other words, the discussion turns from principles of liberty to respect for all humankind [Hill 31]. Decisions are ones which affect lives personally as the right to autonomy does not give anyone the right to control someone else’s right, because “the right presupposes a background of other moral rights and legal rights within a just system, which define an area of permissible conduct,” but it is not necessarily an absolute right [31]. The right to autonomy acts as a protection for the exercise of

personal autonomy, as well as a protection from the infringement of individual autonomy. Nonetheless, this does not guarantee that people will make the best possible choice every time. To say a person is autonomous, in this view, “is not to describe the person . . . it is to grant the person a right to control certain matters for himself or herself” [48]. Human beings are naturally flawed and expecting them to always make the rational choice is unrealistic. In most cases, “people should be allowed to make their own choices even if the choices are likely to be foolish” because they were the ones who individually made those choices and the choices made should be respected [49]. If important decisions were made for people all the time, we would lose what makes us inherently human; the ability to make our own decisions. There would be no learning from our mistakes, adaptation of new considerations into our original thoughts, or overcoming great struggle, essentially losing human uniqueness.

Respect becomes the main element of the normative account. The fourth and sixth conditions explicate the roles other individuals play in the way in which people may conceive of their autonomy. Specifically, “(4) other people actually respect this right as well as their other rights...(6) others respect this capacity by not presuming that they value only good experiences for themselves and by not counting their comfort as more important than their declared values” [36]. It is extremely difficult to regulate or control how or if other individuals respect each other’s right to autonomy. If we believe there is a dignity of persons to make self-originating claims, we must also think that the dignity of persons includes the authority to demand respect because “we are accountable to one another for allowing each other to make his own choices” [Darwall 276]. We are members of the same moral community and must hold others and ourselves accountable for respecting personal autonomy. Same goes for how others view an



individual's personal thoughts, desires, and ideas. With these conditions' dependency upon others, rather than the self, in order to be autonomous in the fullest sense, one could not be autonomous without a social context. In other words, "[autonomy] requires a social context as an enabling, or causal, background; it cannot emerge except out of social relationships. Although autonomy is individuating in its effects on persons, it never loses its social rootedness. Socially deracinated, autonomy would be a pointless and meaningless notion" [Friedman 17].

This social background and influence is what makes the final condition of opportunity extremely difficult to accomplish. Even if everyone had a right to autonomy that was respected by everyone, and had rational decision making skills that they used when making decisions on respected human values, that does not guarantee "they have ample opportunities to make use of these conditions in living a life over which they have a high degree of control" [Hill 36]. Making opportunities available to everyone is nearly impossible to achieve due to natural constraints brought on by health concerns such as disease, poverty, overpopulation in the region, and the absence of technological advances in society [36]. Opportunities may also be limited based on the society in which one lives. For example, the restrictions placed on some groups' right to ample opportunity to exercise their psychological capacities "by pointless role-expectations, conformist attitudes, and the lack of what Mill called "experiments in living"" [36]. These constraints, however, are deemed as constraints from a perspective which knows that these hindrances exist. The world in which we all live in and the society we currently have are created by the social restrictions people put on it; it is a socially created problem. We know they are constraints because we were the ones who subconsciously created them for ourselves and others. Unfortunately, some do not know that the realities of their choice situations are not

self-controlled [36]. When opportunities are limited, it is as though they are being oppressed, because they are unable to exercise their right to autonomy. Not only can one's right to autonomy be infringed upon, but, in a sense, their ability to be self-reflective in their own personal thoughts, desires, and concerns becomes hindered. Moreover, "unjust or oppressive social conditions are those that prevent some group of people from acting according to what matters to them" [Friedman 18].

When one is able to fulfill every one of these conditions, they are then autonomous and act autonomously in the fullest sense. However, autonomy comes in degrees and "no finite being is thoroughly self-determined. Even self-reflection itself can range along a continuum" [7]. The more one self reflects and is not influenced by others' thoughts and actions., as well as the more respect one receives becomes for acknowledgement of their right to autonomy, the more autonomous they are. When the extent of those conditions decreases, so does the extent of the autonomy.

## **II: Gender and Gendering**

Gender, and gender identity, reflect the cultural interpretation of bodies [Butler 36]. There is a wide array of possibilities for cultural interpretation, but "Gender must be understood as a modality of taking on or realizing possibilities, a process of interpreting the body, giving it cultural form" [36]. Gendering used to only have reference to grammatical gender of nouns, but now the same has happened to individuals. For individuals, a gender is being assigned or attributed to them in order to divide, classify, or differentiate according to gender [Oxford Dictionary]. In this way, people are, essentially, being forced to embody a gender and adhere to its framework of character traits without their own consideration. Gendering in the way that we

do makes it seem as though some people do not have the right to autonomy. Gendering, in the binary sense, creates a divide among the sexes and reinforces stereotypes of each group. It is against the sexes because the cultural construct of gender takes its meaning from what is considered the traits of males and females.

As discussed previously, an individual's right to autonomy can be violated when they are treated as though they either do not possess the right or the right is not respected. For women, conditions (4) respecting the right to autonomy, (6) respecting human values, and (7) opportunity, cannot be attempted by other individuals when they do not even recognize the right to the capacity in which others recognize men's right to autonomy. Without any recognition, women will always be unable to act as autonomously as their male counterparts. In relation to history and literature, it is often believed that women do not even possess autonomy, because autonomy is perceived to be associated with masculine traits. For example, it wasn't until 1875 that women were considered legal persons as the legal existence of a woman became suspended during a marriage because the husband and wife were considered as one person under the law (*Minor v Happersett*, 88 U.S. 162).

Despite women becoming more prominent figures today than they were previously, when it comes to fact and fiction, men seem to be the easy pick "as the protagonists of stories about heroes who pursued their values and dreams even in the face of militant opposition, whether as war heroes, civil rights activists, entrepreneurs, or adventurers . . .the preponderance of men in narratives of autonomy could easily cast a masculine shadow over the concept" [Allen 100]. That is not to say that men are always portrayed in this light. There are small minorities of men who are actually punished for being autonomous or acting autonomously for the sole reason that they

are not contributing to the group, especially in traditional patriarchal hierarchies [100]. Other minority pockets of men end up challenging “what they take to be the overly individualistic and ungrounded autonomy of the liberal tradition” [100]. Individuals who identify as male and individuals who identify as female, in the binary sense, both struggle to break the conventions set up for them historically.

Gender and gendering has been at the forefront of many studies for children and especially developmental psychology. The consensus among researchers has shown that by around the age of two, gender becomes crucial as children procure the ability to recognize and differentiate between male and female figures and can identify in which group they belong [166]. While research may show this to be the consensus, some suggest saliency at an even earlier age. For example, adult caregivers interact with female infants differently than their male counterparts, as seen in the “Baby X” studies [166]. Not only are infants of a perceived gender interacted with differently, their emotional responses are also interpreted differently [166]:

As Susan Golombok and Robyn Fivush put it in their study of gender development:

‘Boys are played with more roughly than girls, beginning in infancy and throughout the childhood years. Further, parents assume their infant girls will be more vocal and more interested in social interaction than their infant boys, and parent work harder to engage girls in mutual social interaction, such as eye gazing and reciprocal emotional expressions. [166]

Based on the vicious cycle in which human beings are essentially promoting gender stereotypes by treating the young differently based on their perceived gender and biological sex, there may be a gendered conception of the sense of selfhood that extends to infancy [166]. There is no

question that selves exist because of their unique nature of the understanding of personhood, however, through childhood development, social interconnectedness plays an interesting role. Insofar as this role is concerned, autobiographical memory and self-made narratives have capacities and abilities which are socially developed [167]. To be clear, “autobiography is not memory of what happened; it is the way we make sense of what happened, and this is fundamentally a sociocultural process” [167]. Typically, this occurs through the interactions with adult caregivers, who spend majority of their time with children and imprint their thoughts, opinions, and actions onto them. Narrative selves are not, however, solely socially constructed, because as Friedman points out, the telling of how selves are constructed is a very difficult thing to do without “presupposing the existence of selves as the constructing agents” [34]. The very reason why these studies on infants and early childhood development is important is because if the ability to self-narrate our lives revolves around sociocultural relations that reinforce gendering through subordination of women, then “although critical resistance and progressive self transformation are certainly not impossible, the task of achieving them will be different” [Allen 170]. Gendering, in the way that we do, undermines conditions necessary to women’s conception of autonomy:

To be sure, because of gender differences in socialization, autonomy may actually occur less often in women than in men, As Diana Meyers has documented, male socialization still promotes autonomy competency more effectively than does female socialization. Overall, men have had far greater opportunities than women to act and live autonomously. Such modes of action and living have, in the past, been closed to most women because they required unavailable (to women) resources such as political power,

financial independence, or the freedom to travel unmolested in public space-to jog safely, for example, through Central Park [Friedman 102].

Gendering, in the way that we do, picks and chooses not only who gets rights, but who gets to exercise other fundamental human rights such as the right to free movement, education, safety, recognition as their own person, and free choice of employment. For a woman, many of these rights are very difficult to actualize because of her perceived role in society. Moreover, the division we have societally created between men and women struggles to allow for the normative account of autonomy because of how the divide is specified. The divide is specified by four key ways; subjection, dependency, identity, and recognition. All of these key ways are interrelated to each other and power connects them.

A good way to best understand this power dynamic with subjection, dependency, identity, and recognition is through the role women play in the military. The military has had a tenacious relationship with sexual assault for a long time. As of 2014, there were an “an estimated 20,000 active duty service members experiencing unwanted sexual contact...and sexual assaults even occurring in combat environments” [Castro 1]. The military is the type of organization in which patriarchal structure and gender stereotypes persist. Such characteristics like formality, rank, leadership, loyalty, camaraderie, and emotional control as well as masculine ideals like dominance, aggression, and self-sufficiency ultimately define the values individuals must portray [2]. With a history of hyper-masculinity fostered by a primarily male dominated group, negative “attitude towards women have been linked with acceptance and perpetration of sexual harassment and assault...Women in the military have reported feeling scrutinized and watched by men, judged as less competent, and subjected to jealousy and anger” [2]. The power

complex within the military structure makes it difficult for women to do the jobs that they are assigned. Unfortunately, the hierarchy clearly illustrates how subjection, dependency, identity, and recognition affects women.

Subjection can be seen through the relationships women have with their commanding officers. Subjection, according to Judith Butler, is not only paradoxical, but refers to the ambivalence with which one is deemed a subject in and through “the process of being subjected to disciplinary norms” [Allen 72]. Butler follows Michel Foucault in saying power is what we understand to be not only the factor in forming the subject, but what it depends on for its own existence [72]. What Butler is trying to say is that power controls the external factors such as the world in which it revolves, how it identifies, etc., which form its existence. The subject also depends on power, because without it, it would not exist. In Foucault’s own analysis of subjection, he shows just how influential power can be by describing the ways in which power constitutes forms of “identity that both constrain subordinated subjects by compelling them to take up subordinating norms . . . while simultaneously enabling them to be subjects with the capacity to act” [72].

After describing her account of subjection, Butler makes the claim that our subjectification necessitates a deep connection with those we are dependent upon, even if that connection creates a subordinating relationship [81]. As Amy Allen retorts though, naturally a deep connection based on dependency of another being would make subordination possible because of the vulnerability to it [81]. Simone de Beauvoir, who inaugurated second wave feminism, argues in *The Second Sex*, “that gender is not a natural but a social kind and that it is socially constructed in such a way that gender is never merely difference but always also implies

a relationship of dominance and subordination” [80]. Dominance and subordination also show the role of power and its effect on those who are either dominant or subordinate. Typically, power positively affects those who are dominant and negatively affects those who are subjected to it.

Those negative effects are then tied to identity and how subjects view themselves on the whole. Amy Allen explicates this relationship further to show:

This means that the very identity of the subordinated subject is dependent upon the relations of power that shape it. The dismantling of those relations of power, then, threatens the subject’s identity and sense of self. Because these relations of power both sustain the subject’s identity and subordinate her-and sustain her identity by subordinating her- she develops an attachment to them, despite the damage done by subordination. Faced with a choice between an identity based on subordination and no identity at all, the subordinated subject chooses the former. [75]

Subordination does not, strictly speaking, only affect women. Gender identity, either masculine or feminine, like Simone de Beauvoir posits, is a social and cultural construct. However, once one recognizes the significant role subjectification and subordination play, the entire gender dimorphism threatens the conceptualizations of the self [105].

Recognition, unfortunately, relies on power and all it controls, including subjectification, dependency, and subordination. Recognition needs the subject to be dependent on being subordinated, because if the attachment on the dependency is to “live in a less constrained way [it] is for it to risk unrecognizability” [85]. Butler mentions that if this statement were to be reversed, it implies that “recognition itself is a form of subordination” [85]. Recognition is so



powerful that it is right to assume human beings crave it and any kind we can get [85]. These four key ways gendering effects autonomy show just how easy gendering can affect the sense of self and individuality.

### **III. Women**

The way in which women have been treated throughout generations has been not only degrading, but subhuman. As a minority, women serve as dual forms of recognition. Between women and other minority groups, women are regarded highly, and between women and men, women are regarded lowly. They hold a high and low status at the same time, in different group circles, for the same reason. For example, women are recognized more than other minorities for the respect that they are given, but are still lower in societal status than men because they serve as a function. Because of their function and utility, the respect they are given, in comparison to other minorities, is “pseudo-respect.” Real respect does not exist for their individual person. Their only sense of worth is their ability, biologically, to produce children and their nurturing demeanor necessary for domesticity. Acting as a support system for men, women are seen, but never heard. It is not as though women are mute, but, relating back to “pseudo-respect,” individual thoughts and opinions of women only go so far as their ability to reinforce the efforts of men. Their experiences of being oppressed deny women the ability to define themselves by their own thoughts, desires, and actions [Nedelsky 9]. If, however, women are given the opportunity to be expressive, it is as though those thoughts and opinions are invalidated just for the sake of them being women.

Being a woman and living in the global society is extremely difficult. She is inherently different by nature, but also different just by being classified as a woman; living within the

stereotypical framework of womanhood. Because of nature and biology, there are constraints on a woman's ability to do certain things she may wish to do physically. However, a woman should not be denied an opportunity, employment, education, travel, or anything else simply because she is a woman, but because of her individual ability and whether or not she can accomplish the task at hand. Currently, women's abilities are determined by gendered stereotypes. For Example, in the documentary *Fast Food Women*, managers of a restaurant in Kentucky commented that no man would ever pursue a job in the fast food industry due to its lack in benefits and a living wage, but it makes sense for a woman [Veltman 287]. Many believe that she depends on the man of the household to provide for her and the family. A woman in the kitchen makes sense because of her role of servitude. The managers of the restaurant also believe women do not have to think too hard and they "will derive a sense of accomplishment from completing a job while following orders..." [287]. Thinking for themselves is an unfeminine quality of women and disregards the silent role they are supposed to play as mere objects.

There is a myth in the Western world that women enjoy being told what to do, because their function is to serve at the pleasure of their man, on whom they deeply depend for their mere existence. Gendering in the way that we do is a systemic problem; it is a vicious cycle which reinforces gender stereotypes in our children and for generations to come. When it comes to relations between men and women, a woman's "no" is treated as though it is equated to a "yes" (Friedman 75). A woman's personal thoughts mean almost nothing and are disregarded; the result of which is "women's widespread vulnerability to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and rape" [75]. Gendering women into stereotypes hinders their ability to be who they are as individuals. It also acts as the ultimate divide in the binary world between people who identify as

male and female by using differences in identity to justify stereotypes placed on either group, thereby reinforcing the identities of men and women and the rules they must adhere to in order to identify as male or female. It must be recognized that this is a problem and that women's personhood must be given back to them by recognizing and respecting their individual rights to autonomy. Autonomy is the key which unlocks the potential of every being as it "is the foundation of human dignity and the source of all morality" [Hill 43]. Without allowing autonomy to be fully fostered in all human beings, gender and gendering will continue to limit autonomy.

#### **IV: Gendering Undermines Autonomy**

In this regard, undermining the conception of autonomy by dictating who is deserving of autonomy based on their perceived gender is morally wrong because it gets away from the true intention of autonomy. Autonomy, or rather the value of autonomy, takes a utilitarian position. As is with the definition of utilitarianism, "the value of autonomy is supposed to be based on the goods which it makes possible: the promotion of well-being and the prevention of harm, or, more particularly, the advancement of self-development and contentment" [Young 36]. The value of the autonomy of individual thought relates causally to the pursuit of truth, which is necessary for the realisation of the greatest happiness [36]. Along similar lines as Mill and his defense of the value of autonomy in the traditional sense, "we cannot make people in general better off . . . by restricting individual autonomy" , rather it must be promoted [36]. Selfhood or personhood help shape and form individual identity, as well as self-direction in one's life to create personal meaning. More importantly, the value of autonomy itself is greater than the effects it produces [40]. It is valuable for its own sake because it has intrinsic worth which produces greater

self-esteem for the individual personhood. Personhood must be given back to women through recognizing and respecting their autonomy because without recognition and respect, and subsequently opportunity, they will have no true individual identity. Even the smallest steps towards admitting that gendering undermines autonomy will make a big difference in woman empowerment the future.

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