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Neutralizing gender: autonomy's role in disarming gender bias

Scott Szymanski

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

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NEUTRALIZING GENDER:
AUTONOMY'S ROLE IN
DISARMING GENDER BIAS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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Master of Arts

in

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by
Scott Szymanski
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ABSTRACT

Figuring out what one's identity means has always been an essential task of human life. Decidedly, our values, commitments, aspirations, and experiences all contribute to this identity. I submit that individuals have control over who they are and what they become by way of these attributes. As such, control over these characteristics gives us the power to define ourselves as we wish. In my thesis, I attempt to express how autonomy is imperative for this control. I take issue with traditional notions of autonomy, concluding that they do not take into account all that is necessary to ensure a person is self-legislating. I also state some of them allow oppressive belief systems such as sexism to count as autonomous. I replace these conceptions with my version of autonomy called the "Four C's." These, I claim, are at least necessary for an autonomous life. Alongside this analysis, I examine our common conception of gender. I recognize it as being based on the false notion that gender is a social manifestation of sex, that it mimics our biological characteristics. I illustrate that, when we look for explanations of gender in nature, we do not actually find them—rather, we create them in what I term *gendered biology*, the idea that we merely appropriate to nature our ideas of gender in order to justify why gender, in its current form, is valid. I explain that this view leads to sexism, a necessarily inhibiting system of values that falsely makes claims about the abilities of people. I offer the theory that gender is a social concept, that it is an entirely socially constructed idea that is only held in place by a common consensus of its definition. In this way, gender is hollow and is always available for manipulation and revision. Ultimately, I conclude that: other theories of autonomy allow sexism to count as autonomous; our current conception of gender provides unnecessary support for sexism; my reconception of autonomy precludes sexism from counting as autonomous; and a proper thinking of gender illustrates the malleability of its content.

INTRODUCTION

It is not a new concept that humans function in collective social groups. Our societies bustle with individuals who are pursuing many different forms of life; all represent routes to achieving particular goals that are important to each person's happiness. Every person determines her goals, manages a plan to reach them, and points herself in their direction. Throughout the course of her life, she will go through this same procedure numerous times, each time setting a goal, and striving toward it, according to what she finds most meaningful to her. Does she alone create the values that drive her choices or are her choices influenced by others? How does this influence process operate, and how much effect does it have on the individual?

These questions amount to asking what it takes for someone to be autonomous. A very basic definition of autonomy is "governed by one's own law".¹ However, this has been modified and amended throughout the lengthy debate of autonomy. Immanuel Kant has defined it in terms of the will's separation from personal interests.² Others have used a hierarchical definition by determining autonomy based on the endorsement a person gives to her first-order desires.³ Even still, autonomy is defined by the process of self-reflective endorsement of the values and commitments one maintains.⁴ It has been thought of as a political, metaphysical, and social topic, and is conceived through a wide variety of definitions of the individual.⁵ The topic of autonomy,

¹ Jennifer Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts, and Possibilities," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1 (1989): 7.

² James Stacey Taylor, introduction to *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 1.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Marilyn Friedman, *Autonomy, Gender, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

⁵ Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, "Autonomy Reconfigured" in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 7.

needless to say, is highly varied, making it exceptionally difficult (and at the same time quite liberating) to choose between the dozens of conceptions available.

In my first chapter, entitled “What is Autonomy?,” I wish to explain the divide autonomy theorists make between content-neutral, or procedural, autonomy and substantive autonomy. The former theory posits that, for one to be autonomous, she must subject her values and commitments to a certain kind of critical reflection. A person might, for example, be required to reflect on a value she holds, determine if it is important to her in light of her other values, and then act on this value partly because it is important to her and partly because of the self-reflective endorsement process. Generally, as is standard among almost all conceptions of autonomy, she must be free of coercive, manipulative, or (self-) deceptive elements in her reflective, endorsement, and acting process. This view is put forth by the autonomy author Marilyn Friedman, whom I will be covering in this chapter.

The second type, substantive autonomy, accepts minimum procedural requirements but lays restrictions on the content of those reflectively endorsed values. These restrictions might be structural in nature such as types of upbringing or social situations that limit autonomy, but they can also culminate in the internalization of false norms or being of an unstable mindset. For example, a person might not be able to be autonomous as long as she is living under severely oppressive social constraints. Although substantive autonomy is further split into “strong” and “weak” accounts, for the duration of this paper I will not make such a distinction. Susan Wolf will be used to represent substantive autonomy, as her account requires a person to have an upbringing and mindset that is conducive to reason and rational deliberation, two qualifications that, for her, permit moral responsibility.

With Marilyn Friedman and Susan Wolf as representative of each side of the divide respectively, I will explain, examine, and critique their notions of what autonomy requires for it to be formidable as a social theory. I will also illustrate how the theories given by Friedman and Wolf fail as comprehensive views of autonomy, each theory failing for different reasons. I believe Friedman's procedural account is too inclusive and allows those operating under severely oppressive social conditions to be counted as autonomous. I feel her account both neglects to include enough steps in the value reflection process as well as permits wholly sexist values (and the norms which perpetuate them) to count as acceptable for one to be autonomous. In contrast, I determine Wolf's account to fail because it precludes any "rehabilitation" of an agent who merely happened to be raised in an extremely limiting and oppressive upbringing. I feel her account is too constricting and, ironically, strips a person of her ability to exercise autonomy by arguing that a bad upbringing necessarily breeds a bad person who is incapable of manipulating her values adequately from those of her upbringing.

My second chapter, "Autonomy: A Revision," will explicate my personal conception of autonomy and how it is accessible within a modern society. I plan to illustrate the process of self-reflection as involving what I call the "Four C's": consider one's type (as reflective and intersectional), consider one's own values and commitments, consider the source (of one's values), and consider tacit peripheral group membership (groups—generally unwanted—that one might be lumped into in virtue of an accepted value or commitment). These are meant to amend, replace, or be added to the standard procedural requirements. In addition to these, I wish to show that, no matter one's status as "procedurally autonomous," one must not subscribe to any values that valorize blind subjugation and hatred such as racism and sexism. These views, I contend, are based on false norms, and as such, if one were to embody them, one would qualify as acting

under coercive, manipulative, or deceptive conditions. These conditions violate basic accounts of procedural autonomy (including the account on which I build my own), as one would be accepting a false notion as true, a necessarily contradictory and negating process. A person would then be subverting her own autonomy, and so not be acting autonomously.

In my third chapter, entitled “Gender’s Current Limits on Autonomy”, I will delineate the justification for the current conception of gender and how it affects social mobility, especially with respect to personal autonomy. I argue that this definition of “gender” is conceptually flawed due to its reliance on biological determinism as demonstrating the limits of gender manifestation. This theory postulates, first, that gender operates in a mimetic relationship to sex—in other words, gender is merely the social representation of the characteristics of the sexes. It presumes nature is an unchanging, objective aspect of our lives, and since sex is considered to be embedded in nature, it, too, is set. Gender, then, displays the criteria of a binary sex system: women are females and men are males, and necessarily so. This view of gender is incorrect in numerous ways that I will demonstrate: it posits nature as temporally fixed; it assumes gender mirrors sex; it enforces a notion of polarized sexes; it accepts sex criteria as defining characteristics of gender (e.g. females are muscularly weaker than males, and so should never do physically laborious jobs); and it uses *ad hoc* empirical data to back up its claim of gender’s presence in nature. I propose that this data, instead of pointing to nature itself, highlights a fabricated nature I term *gendered biology*.

After the above analysis, I will illustrate the methods society uses to perpetuate this common conception of gender. The first way it does this is by means of using norms and expectations as social control to quell any global revisions to gender. By taking advantage of the human social tendency to groupthink, society continually defines gender to support its already

manifested *ad hoc* conclusions. People tend to police their own behavior by way of appealing to standards of measurement of social acceptance. This permits two things: a reinforcement of already established beliefs and a striving by every individual to fit people into pre-defined categories. I contend that since humans base their lives around predictability, we situate others into familiar groups to make people *intelligible*, giving justification for a person's identity and reasons for performing certain actions. As such, if a woman were to act "as a woman", it would make *sense*—however, if she were to act "as a man," it would cause uncertainty and possibly anxiety. Thus, she would not fit into an *intelligible* group and would, by way of social control, be ostracized for it.

The second way society perpetuates gender is through its own framework of social behavior. As mentioned above, society will provide evidence for gender by way of *ad hoc* data. In a sense, it proves itself *by itself*, creating a tautology by positing a fictive "before" that it itself creates. In other words, society uses its fabrication of the sex/gender relationship to express the "evidence" for the sex/gender relationship. Explanation is confirmed only by "covering up its tracks." Thus, our social world is defined by criteria that are merely formed by the social world itself.

I argue that this sense of biological determinism inevitably leads to sexism. If identities and characteristics people embody are reducible to their sexual natures, then a person is no more than what nature has determined her to be. However, as the preceding paragraph suggests, the characteristics that define concepts of "masculine" and "feminine" are contrived by society itself to validate its own beliefs. Since I claim that society has no real justification for reducing gender to sex, there is no *intelligible* reason to enforce norms which strictly follow this "ideal." I will

demonstrate ways that sexism is brought about by this conception in the realms of self-confidence, performance evaluation, and moral competency.

In the last chapter, entitled “Gender and Autonomy: A Resolution”, I will explain what I believe to be a correct definition of gender by first explaining what gender is: a social concept. As social concepts go, they are fabrications solely created in the social world. The justification for them is only that there is a consensus on their meaning and purpose. One develops a social concept to make sense of something and pin it to a group identity—as I have already stated, this process makes something *intelligible*. As such, it gains its own meaning by whatever is included under the concept itself; in essence, a social concept is *hollow* and filled by criteria that is collectively agreed upon to be attributed to that identity. And so the case goes with gender, as I contend it is a manifestation of a want to classify people into constrained groups so they are displayed as discrete, seemingly fixed identities. The model I will use for this explication is that of Mark Okrent in his book *Rational Animals*.

By creating a working definition for gender that I believe to be precise, I can couple it with my earlier conception of autonomy to explain how, with this redefinition, gender becomes less of a constraining mark of identity than it once was thought to be. In conclusion, I wish to complete the following objectives: illustrate how knowledge of the structure of gender empowers people to reconfigure it; show how the proper definition of gender allows it to be an expression of individual interpretation; express how an incorrect conception of gender (or race, or ethnicity, or class) is unduly limiting to autonomy; and give reasons why autonomy is imperative to disarming oppressive structures of sexism.

CHAPTER 1. WHAT IS AUTONOMY?

1.1 Introduction

One is generally thought to be autonomous when she is self-determining to the extent of being in charge of her own behavior and deciding which values she embodies. In this way, she is at least in part directing what happens to her in her life. This idea is broad enough to be illustrated in a variety of conceptions that range from hyper-individualistic (also known as atomistic autonomy, the idea that one is in complete control of every aspect of one's identity) to essentially social (the idea that the resources for one's identity are first provided by parents and peers and are only later available for revision by the person herself). What they all share in common is the notion of an individual having some stake in her own life. She makes her own decisions about the course of her life, is the determiner of her own behavior, and chooses the values that she finds important. Autonomy is defined by the individual, and no matter the influence of others, the person herself cannot elude the responsibility she has for herself.

One significant part about contemporary theories of autonomy is the focus on the interaction between the individual and her social environment. Relational autonomy finds itself on the notion that the individual is not operating in opposition to her social structure, but rather is already *embedded* within it.⁶ As Jennifer Nedelsky claims, "We come into being in a social context that is literally constitutive of us. Some of our most essential characteristics, such as our capacity for language and the conceptual framework through which we see the world, are not made by us, but given to us...through our interactions with others."⁷ Atomistic autonomy leaves

⁶ Nedelsky, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

this out: it focuses heavily on self-creation, the combination of characteristics of oneself that are somehow composed exclusively by the individual. Instead of believing we each operate in our own solipsistic vacuums, we must recognize how the structure of the group frames what we can become.

We cannot deny the impact of our social system. It provides humans with the opportunities to learn and experience what is possible in life. Our communities are havens of information that are ever-present in our lives—even being in isolation away from others does not negate the influence others have on our own ideals and values. The categories and labels by which we define ourselves are socially derived (or at least, at minimum, inspired): doctor, scientist, smart, humble, and caring are all characteristics that either only have meaning in relation to others or embody descriptions that manifest themselves in cultural ideals. Some of the procedural aspects of autonomy require social interaction: considering alternative forms of life requires those forms to be *presented* to a person; options for values may only make sense in their relationship to others; the capacity to be autonomous is granted by way of the social structure allowing a person to “think for herself.” It could be argued that autonomy *only* has meaning in relation to others as part of social existence. People, at least at the preliminary exercise of autonomy, are already constructed of values that are present within their culture.⁸

In the rest of the chapter, I will consider two conceptions of autonomy, one formulated by Marilyn Friedman and the other by Susan Wolf. I will describe what sets them apart from other conceptions and why they are both valid contenders for a functioning ideal of autonomy. While these two definitions are viable, they are insufficient for working definitions of autonomy. To resolve this issue, I will substitute my own conception of autonomy that I believe encompasses

⁸ Mackenzie and Stoljar, 22.

not only the requirements of autonomy, but also what makes autonomy meaningful to an individual within a social system.

1.2 Friedman's Procedural Account of Autonomy

Marilyn Friedman's focus with respect to autonomy is to keep it content-neutral.⁹ As mentioned in my introduction, content-neutral autonomy sets up criteria that must be met in order to be autonomous. In a way, it can be seen as a metaphorical checklist of requirements that are marked off one by one as they are completed. It emphasizes the method of going about making choices and deciding which values are important to a person. What defines this view is the fact that the substance of the choices is not at stake—it does not matter what the choices are about, only that they are performed in a proper way. The way a person comes to consider and finally select a choice is key to determining if that person is autonomous.

A common sequence of steps to content-neutral autonomy are as follows: an individual must first reflect on her values and commitments to see which she believes are most important to her; from here, she must accept or reject them depending on how they fit with the identity she wishes to embody; finally, by endorsing certain values and having those values as partly the cause of her subsequent behavior, the individual can be said to have sufficiently contemplated her lifestyle and the values she upholds; thus, she is autonomous.

The procedural account of autonomy that Friedman subscribes to has further stipulations: freedom from coercion or manipulation in the evaluation and choice-making process, the capacity to be autonomous in the first place, endorsing values and commitments even in the face of minimal opposition, and a person's actions being both partly caused by her actual values and

⁹ Friedman, 19.

partly caused by the reflective endorsement process. Each of these, as well as the reflective process illustrated in the preceding paragraphs, will be examined.

First, we must consider the self-reflective process. Since Friedman uses procedural autonomy as her basis, this aspect is necessary (but for her, not sufficient) for autonomy. What exactly does it mean to be self-reflective? A person must examine her values and commitments in such a way as to acknowledge if they are complementary or detrimental to the identity that she believes herself to have. If we are to accept that the self is constituted by values and commitments that give one's life meaning, then we can see self-reflection as the contemplation of those values and commitments to see if they in fact are meaningful.¹⁰ This examination process creates distance between the values and the self that is scrutinizing them. By establishing this distance, an individual is able to put the value or commitment in perspective of other constituent parts of herself, allowing her to see how well one part meshes with others. For example, a woman who collects fine French art might wish to move to Paris to expand her collection. However, she has a husband and children at her current location who do not want to move. She must reflect on her values, determine if her passion for art overrides any of her others (such as family or friendship), and then decide what she wishes to do.

Although self-reflection is a step toward autonomy, it is not a terminal one. It is imperative that one continually exercises self-reflection with each new addition to oneself. Since autonomous life is comprised of autonomous acts, one must always reflect on values to assess their worth. Endorsement of values is twofold: “[It] is based on the deeper wants and commitments of the behaving person, is partly caused by her reflections on and reaffirmations of them, and [her behavior] mirrors those wants and commitments in the sense of helping her to

¹⁰ Ibid., 5.

achieve, promote, or protect them.”¹¹ By engaging in reflection of her deepest concerns, she gains insight into herself and is empowered to act on what she finds as important to her. She allows herself to act according to not merely what she speculates her identity to be, but what she *develops* her identity as once she acknowledges and affirms (or denies) aspects of herself. This would be conducive to the idea of self-creation.

Friedman’s procedural account stipulates that autonomy requires the lack of coercion, manipulation, or self-deception.¹² The concept of autonomy deals with what a person *actually* is; as such, it is clear that autonomy is geared toward the *truth* of a person. Thus, any activity or cognitive state that precludes a person from engaging in truthful reflection and decision-making prevents the realization of autonomy. A person living under severely oppressive conditions, such as a slave, would be unable to live an autonomous life because her situation prevents honest self-consideration. A person living under (and presumably born into) oppressive social conditions might lack the ability to even realize the capacity for autonomy. This capacity—also termed by Friedman as competency—outlines “the effective capacity...to act under some significant range of circumstances in ways that reflect and issue from deeper concerns that one has considered and reaffirmed.”¹³ There are situations in life that call for certain values, and if a person acts on those values but has not reflected on their importance, then she cannot be said to be behaving autonomously. It can be speculated that every human has a capacity to be autonomous, but social conditions can severely limit that possibility and prevent it from ever being realized.

Friedman’s conception of autonomy is quite persuasive. Her account allows for almost anyone who fulfills the qualifications explained above to be considered autonomous, no matter

¹¹ Ibid., 8.

¹² Ibid., 6.

¹³ Ibid., 13.

the content of a person's choices. Through self-reflection, one may endorse or reject characteristics one finds important or superfluous, respectively. This reflection process can achieve self-determination, as behavior is not simply caused by values but also the engagement in this process.¹⁴ Not only this, but Friedman's account allows a person to be assumed autonomous unless positive evidence is present to show she is not.¹⁵ This is complementary to Friedman's goal of inclusivity of as many people as possible in an account of autonomy.¹⁶ Since we are to accept others' decisions as autonomous, we are able to respect the *human* capacity for autonomy.

Friedman's account follows the line of the typical formal construction of content-neutral accounts. It maintains that autonomy is present if certain steps are taken to ensure that one's values and commitments actually *are* one's values and commitments. It deals with not only the authenticity of one's values but also with the double-checking that they really are important to the person herself. Indeed, one can embody values that, through reflection, one would come to reject. Ensuring values and commitments are genuine for a person, that her actual preferences have been deeply considered and affirmed, and that her actions reflect her acceptance of these preferences, is important to any theory of autonomy.

Although Friedman makes a valiant effort to put forth her view, my main contention is that her secondary goal for her definition—that “a conception of autonomy with fewer requirements is more widely applicable than otherwise”¹⁷—allows autonomy to be too frivolously given to more people than I believe can be warranted. For Friedman, once one commits the steps of procedure and fulfills the requirements of lacking coercion, having

¹⁴ Ibid., 21.

¹⁵ Ibid., 22.

¹⁶ Ibid., 23.

¹⁷ Ibid.

autonomy capacity, et cetera, the person can be credibly thought as autonomous. However, this allows certain lifestyles to be autonomous even though they are inherently detrimental to those living under them. For instance, Friedman would accept a subservient housewife as autonomous because she has gone through the procedural process of assessing and confirming the values she wishes to embody. However, she lives under circumstances that severely preclude her ability to readily accept alternative lifestyles and values. Her options, therefore, are too limited to demonstrate actual autonomous consideration. The system that is influencing (and by all means directing) the wife's value acceptance and behavior is inherently one of sexism. This, I contend, undermines autonomy, and so Friedman's content-neutral account falters.

To charge Friedman with this claim, we must first consider if the wife satisfies the criteria of procedural autonomy mentioned above. The wife reflects on her values and commitments and readily endorses them (e.g. women are not capable of making large-scale decisions, family is the most important and defining aspect of a housewife, taking care of her husband overshadows all other priorities, et cetera). She, as a human, already has the capacity for autonomy and should be respected as such. However, when we consider the qualification of freedom from coercion, manipulation, or self-deception, we hit a snag. Surely the housewife lives under conditions that allow her at least freedom of mental competence, as she has been able to go through the defining step of self-reflective endorsement. However, could her values and commitments, no matter how much she reflectively endorses them, be loaded with self-deception? Due to the sexist source of her ideals—and most likely the urging of her husband that she embody them—she might very well be in a social position that reinforces them through a sort of confirmation bias.

The subservient wife may believe that it is important not just to her livelihood but also to maintain her status quo as a housewife to forgo making substantive decisions in the household regarding finances or location changes (such as moving to a new city). She may feel that women are not capable of making these decisions for any number of reasons—par content-neutral autonomy, it does not matter *why* she holds these beliefs, only that she holds them. Thus, she precludes her autonomy capacity by subsuming herself under the rule of her husband for reasons that might be unfounded.

If a person were to embody sexist values and commitments and take them as “true” for herself, this mere acceptance of them does not outright make them true objectively. Although there may be truth insofar as the values are “real” to the person, this does not mean that, because a person might be a female, for example, that she is somehow less capable than a male at performing a certain task such as decision-making. Friedman merely wants to ask if the value is credible to the person, not if it is credible *at all*. Part of the process of considering a value, I think, entails an examination of the facts on which that value is based—otherwise, any value can be made credible without appealing to an objective justification outside of one’s own perspective.

The bare content-neutral account of autonomy falls short of providing enough requirements for a proper definition of autonomy. It accepts too many—such as oppressed groups and sexist communities—as autonomous. Although these people might have (some) control over their lives, it is hard to imagine that they are entirely free of coercion and manipulation as well as having the social mobility that would permit them to follow any form of life that they wished to. Since this definition will not work for us, we shall move on to a more substantive account put forth by Susan Wolf.

1.3 Wolf's Substantive Account of Autonomy

Substantive accounts of autonomy contend that the content-neutral requirements for autonomy are too broad and allow too many people to be considered autonomous. This can lead to a few consequences: the concept of autonomy is too easily obtainable, thus making the concept less worthy of pursuing as a value on its own; the people who are actually autonomous have no different status than those who merely have been clumped into the autonomous category by procedural accounts; those who might be considered autonomous under content-neutral accounts might actually still be in danger with respect to coercion and manipulation, but as they are labeled autonomous, the attention necessary to bring them out of these oppressive situations will decrease.

Because of these possible issues, substantive accounts take specific note of the *substance* of the decision-making process, not simply the process itself. Substantive accounts work on top of procedural accounts, in that one must meet the content-neutral requirements while also refraining from decisions involving certain topics or lifestyles. These accounts, akin to my concerns, aim to only validate as autonomous lifestyles that meet further requirements such as types of upbringing or conditions of moral responsibility.

Susan Wolf is one proponent of substantive autonomy. Wolf focuses on responsibility in the face of determinism. If a person's actions are guided entirely by determinism, does that mean that what she does is out of her control? And if so, does this mean that she is still responsible for her actions? After all, we have "plenty of intuitions" when it comes to granting responsibility (and subsequent praise and blame) to those around us because "we assume that a person's actions or behavior *originates* in the person himself; he *initiates* the chain of events; the action is

up to him.”¹⁸ It seems obvious that when a person acts, we tend to assume first that her actions stem from her intentions. However, we might excuse a person’s actions if she had been under the influence of hallucinatory drugs, hypnosis, or coercion.

This brings us to the first definition Wolf outlines as being common to many people’s conceptions of autonomy. As she labels it, the Autonomy View of responsibility is that a person is responsible only when the actions of the person originate from inside herself so that she is the determiner of her actions.¹⁹ But there are problems with this view. It accepts the notion of an atomistic self that develops and operates in isolation away from the influence of others. It posits that a person is only responsible insofar as the self that guides her actions has developed in such a way as being free from external forces. Even if this were so, could we be any more responsible for this self than one that is minimally influenced by others?²⁰ Are we more responsible for ourselves *without* a history (atomistic self) than we would be if we were developed by social influence (relational self)? This view also neglects what actually comprises the self. The will is an obvious choice, but what determines that? One possible answer is desire.²¹ There are “animalistic” desires for food, drink, shelter, and sex. However, what about the desire to be charitable or the desire to tell the truth? Surely these desires are not on the same level as those previously mentioned.

The problem, though, is that some desires are innate, some are socially influenced, and some are specifically chosen by an agent. So how do we mark the difference? And likewise, which desires are more influential on the will? Wolf brings to light a possible solution: the Real

¹⁸ Susan Wolf, “Freedom Within Reason,” in *Personal Autonomy: New Essays on Personal Autonomy and Its Role in Contemporary Moral Philosophy*, ed. James Stacey Taylor (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 260.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 261.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*, 263.

Self View. This view maintains that “the freedom necessary for responsibility...consists in the ability not just to behave in accordance with one’s will and to will in accord with one’s desires, but more specifically in the ability to govern one’s will...in accordance with the specific set of desires that constitute one’s system of values.”²² These values are characteristics of a person that she desires to have and exercise as well as *preserve*. In other words, she acknowledges these values as defining of her character, and she wishes to represent herself with them. The “real self” Wolf alludes to is the combination of these *deepest* values that are used by a person to reflect who she is. As Wolf claims, “one’s real self just is one’s collection of values, of features with which one identifies and approves.”²³

But this account of responsibility, just like the Autonomy View, has a fatal flaw. It brings to light what the “real self” consists of, but it does not question the *origin* of these deepest values. What if the person did not select these deep values? Would we still consider them representative? Likewise, could we really say she is responsible for herself—as well as the actions she performs—if these values that constitute the self are not of her choosing? Wolf brings up the example of a racist.²⁴ If a child were raised in a community that espoused racist beliefs as well as discouraged open debate and reflection, it is clear these beliefs would become part of her values, and thus her identity. She would have these racist beliefs at her core, as any child will at first take on the parent’s and community’s beliefs before critical self-reflection of them. The person will generally be happy to claim responsibility for these values, and she will consider them a part of her “real self.”

²² Ibid., 265.

²³ Ibid., 266.

²⁴ Ibid.

Once again, we must consider how, if a person is constituted by the values of others, the person is to be considered responsible for what she takes as her “self.” Insofar as a person’s values are not entirely self-created, how can we claim she is more responsible for these values (and the desires that come from them) than for the carnal desires that make up her basic, animalistic self? It is a difficult question to answer, and one that requires more explanation to determine responsibility.

Wolf concludes that the Real Self View is unsatisfactory because it does not consider the source of one’s values. She also does not want to attribute responsibility to the racist because “he didn’t have a chance to not be a racist.”²⁵ We must keep in mind she wishes for *fair* representation of a person and what that person values. Wolf does not want to hold someone accountable for values she does not fully endorse (presumably, Wolf is interested in self-reflective endorsement here), especially since the origin of these values might be wholly outside of one’s control. Indeed, she admits “If the racist [and] Nazi...are not responsible for their behavior because their behavior is governed by values that are shaped by forces beyond their control, aren’t we all deprived responsibility on the same grounds? After all, we are as much a product of our cultures as these individuals are of theirs.”²⁶

But Wolf takes a peculiar turn here. She claims that cases such as a racist or Nazi or someone who is constituted by a deprived childhood are of people “whose values are faulty, deficient, [and] bad.”²⁷ Because they are all victims of their upbringing, it would seem unfair to charge responsibility to these people for the actions they perform. However, when considering those who exhibit “good action and admirable behavior”, our conclusion changes. Wolf makes

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., 267.

²⁷ Ibid.

note that our “intuitions” about these people are different, in that we hold good people responsible for what they do even though their values originate in the same manner as bad people, that of upbringing and environment. According to Wolf, “When we reflect on the sources of these [good] people’s values or of their courage and commitment and integrity, we are not so concerned or upset by the thought that they are products of their environments.”²⁸ Somehow, because the content of their lives is considered “good” by Wolf (and apparently by our intuitions, too), this method of upbringing allows more control by the good people over their lives.

Take for example the upbringing of a person who is highly influenced by a priest. The person, as a child, might have gone to church willingly. Consequently, the child learns about honesty, integrity, charity, and altruism. The child is willing to take responsibility for her values and actions, as she is, at minimum, displaying pride in what she believes are good things. She may believe that she has reflected on her values, and that she has readily endorsed them as ones she wishes to keep and display.

Examining the lifestyle of the church-going child in comparison to the racist child, we can recognize that the children developed in similar social structures—where the children differ, most obviously, is in the *content* of their resulting values. Wolf creates a “disanalogy” between good-acting agents and bad ones.²⁹ The good content permits access to reason and truth, two aspects that grant the capacity for self-reflection and the ability to analyze one’s values *correctly*. The bad content prevents one from accessing reason and truth, and likewise does not permit the capacity for self-reflection and the ability to analyze one’s values correctly. In fact, Wolf even

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid., 271-2.

claims that “insofar as a person is shaped by his culture to adopt bad values, then, it is in the *nature* of the case that he is shaped by forces of *unreason*.”³⁰

The Reason View of responsibility posits reason as defining of what it means to be responsible. Wolf not only claims it is necessary for responsibility, but also sufficient: “If [people’s] values are formed, or revised or affirmed, in accordance with their reason and truth, then they have exercised...at least all the powers of self-determination that our status as responsible agents requires.”³¹ Thus, if a life lacked reason, it could not be self-determined enough to be considered responsible. Without reason, a child from a bad upbringing is merely “helplessly moved to act in accordance with a desire that he did not choose to acquire.”³² As a bad upbringing goes, a product of this upbringing *naturally* lacks the ability to appreciate why certain values are bad due to the absence of reason. Racism is universally bad, according to Wolf, and thus anything occurring in conjunction with racism is invalid, irrational, and inferior.

We can make a quick note of where I believe Wolf gets her inspiration. She is a proponent of virtue ethics, an ethical idea that purports that what is most important to a moral lifestyle is not a person’s performance, but rather her *character*. A person has a good moral character when she lives a life in accordance with the virtues—for example, justice, integrity, charity, benevolence, honesty, et cetera. Indeed, Wolf claims “The freedom needed for responsibility involves the freedom to see things aright...to appreciate the True and the Good.”³³ But what does it mean to “see things aright?” Does this mean that a person could have once held bad values but now has corrected them? Is it only from a good upbringing that one can see things this way?

³⁰ Ibid., 270, my emphasis.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid., 266.

³³ Ibid., 273.

For a person to be responsible, she must have access to reason, and it is only through a good upbringing that she does. But as far as I can tell, Wolf never makes a temporal claim that a person from a bad upbringing could ever in her future actively change her values from those she was instilled with in childhood. She speaks of the good-acting and bad-acting agents as if they are unchanging entities who, by way of their upbringing, make particular decisions in certain ways. She claims people from bad upbringings are precluded from experiencing reason, and so cannot be responsible for their behavior. But if they somehow gained access to some of the qualities that define a good upbringing, say, a good role model, could bad-acting agents be able to be reasonable, and thus responsible? My issue is that Wolf never makes a firm claim one way or the other. She mentions that we must have freedom from bad external forces and she even gives some examples of them;³⁴ however, she never directly states that a person can pull herself out of a bad upbringing into a responsible life.

She also never fully defines what a good and bad upbringing entail and how far in a person's life their influence reaches. She illustrates characteristics of good and bad upbringings, but never draws a line between an upbringing and the rest of one's life. Where does the upbringing end and the consequence of that upbringing begin? It could be fathomed she means adulthood, but this can be defined in many different ways, none of which are directly explicated by Wolf. We can assume, without this distinction, that one is always in this upbringing phase, and therefore, one can never attain an achievement or characteristic that is not allowable by one's upbringing. In this case, a person who is raised in a bad environment that precludes reason, like the racist, can never achieve reason, and so cannot be responsible for any action in her entire life.

³⁴ Ibid., 270.

Because Wolf does not explicitly draw a firm line differentiating upbringing and the life afterward, it is difficult to accept that there is a distinction in her theory.

Using reason as necessary and sufficient for responsibility is problematic, too, especially since she refuses to accept autonomy as a part of her theory. She pigeonholes the definition of “autonomy” by using the Kantian metaphysical notion.³⁵ This allows her to shunt the Autonomy View of responsibility. Despite this effort, I think she would agree with the relational account of the term, as Wolf agrees that the self is constituted both by social influence as well as personal deliberation and decision-making processes.³⁶ However, since she bases responsibility on reason alone and does not fully explain where an upbringing ends and its influence begins, it seems we do not have enough information to give her argument full credibility. Moreover, she neglects to unequivocally define some of her essential terminology like reason, upbringing, freedom, perception, and sensibility. We know a person must have reason, but this is only acquired through a certain upbringing; likewise, reason is the only characteristic a person requires for being responsible. However, we do not know if it is possible to alter a person’s circumstances so she, despite a bad upbringing, can become reasonable. Value alteration appears exclusive to those of good upbringings.³⁷

There are indeed cases that might undermine Wolf’s conclusion. Take the case of a person who grows up in the ghetto under poor living conditions that include crime, a limited worldview, neglectful and pessimistic parents, and poor role models. This person’s environment breeds concepts of selfishness, poor health habits, and limited friendship. A lack of adequate sustainable means for survival prompts the person to engage in crime or dishonest behavior in

³⁵ Ibid., 261.

³⁶ Ibid., 270.

³⁷ Ibid., 269.

order to secure essentials like food and water. Accessibility to diverse lifestyle choices is precluded by the limited information about the world the person receives through family, friends, and an under-funded school system. Surely, this person would lack the development of reason. What if, despite these terrible conditions (including her parents' apathy toward an education), she personally sought after higher learning and was accepted to a decent university. Here she learned about the world, the many options for lifestyles, and different topics of study she was never exposed to as a child. She might decide to embody altruistic beliefs and start a tutoring program in her ghetto to aid others in understanding the importance of education.

What would Wolf say to this? I believe Wolf might make the claim that, although this person went through childhood under bad conditions, her decision to attend college and start a tutoring program in her ghetto was due to a reaction to her upbringing. In this case, it is proven right that a person is not fully determined by her upbringing, that she is capable on her own volition to seek out alternative sources of values. Was she somehow infused with reason and truth? Wolf could question whether a role model facilitated in the person's aspirations of college—but what if she decided all on her own to go to college? It might have been mentioned in her high school but without much support from her teachers. Is it not conceivable that she alone thought college would be good for her? I believe this illustrates a flaw in Wolf's argument, one that might be corrected if Wolf better explained her position.

Let us not forget about sexism. It can be said that racism is synonymous to sexism. Both systems use a set of arbitrary guidelines (usually uncontrollable, like skin color or sex) by which to judge other human beings. These guidelines stem from a generalization of people of a certain type (e.g. all blacks are criminals, or all women are emotional). It is a judgment of a person in virtue of an arbitrary characteristic she happens to (or is merely thought to) embody. Both

systems are based on false norms, since the guidelines, regardless of their truth value, are established as firm, definitive criteria of a person or type of person. Thus, a racist sees those she is racist toward as being of a certain character regardless of who they actually are; likewise, a sexist recognizes men and women as being of certain types and expects different behaviors from each. Even the woman who embodies sexist ideas subjects herself to this labeling process by which she forces herself to conform to values that have no moral truth. She might believe women are naturally intellectually inferior to men, and so she unduly limits herself by a presupposition that is only perpetuated without question through sexism. This undermines the ability of *reason* and reflective endorsement of values since these values are taken for granted.

1.4 Conclusion

To sum up the contentions I have with the two above conceptions of autonomy: I believe Friedman neglected to take full account of the *source* of values and weigh their validity to their truth value; I also believe her conception allows those under oppressive situations—subservient citizens, slaves, et cetera—to count as autonomous, which would inevitably prevent them from gaining the ethical attention they might need to get out of such situations. If one is autonomous, why should someone intervene to bring about more autonomy?

I also feel Wolf does not sufficiently support her establishment of reason as a determining factor of autonomy. If we consider the lack of extensive definitions for some of her major terminology as well as an absence of a stark limit to upbringing, we can hardly conclude exactly what she means by her theory. It appears she wants to prevent the manifestation of oppressive belief systems such as racism from counting as responsible, but she fails to illustrate that lacking reason in upbringing fully precludes one from finding it later in life. I believe my example of the

ghetto child shows that a person's outlook is not entirely determined nor wholly limited by her experiences as a child, even while lacking the particular circumstances of a good upbringing that could be brought about by things such as role models.

It appears we are left without a satisfactory version of autonomy for our purposes. In the next chapter, I will illustrate my conception and how it is more sufficient for guaranteeing autonomy to people who exercise it. I will also show that autonomy is not compatible with oppressive belief systems such as sexism.

CHAPTER 2. AUTONOMY: A REVISION

2.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, we analyzed two conceptions of autonomy. The first, put forth by Marilyn Friedman, was a version of content-neutral, or procedural, autonomy. We discovered that this conception was too inclusive to the point of counting as autonomous lifestyles that accepted values that are manifested in oppressive social systems, values such as necessary subservience to other people. The second conception, represented by Susan Wolf, was a version of substantive autonomy. It turned out to be insufficient for our purposes because it established too strict of requirements for the actualization of autonomy. A person would have to be brought up in a certain way in order to become autonomous, and this is too exclusionary for autonomy to be useful—indeed feasible—for most people.

In response, I wish to unpack my own conception of autonomy to express what I think is required for people to become autonomous and for as many people as possible to count as such. My goals are as follows: modify the procedural account of autonomy so to make a more robust requirement of steps that must be undertaken; defend autonomy as a substantive value that is crucial to individuality; and illustrate substantive restrictions that prevent certain lifestyles from being able to continue under the guise of autonomy.

My goal is to develop a stronger conception of procedural autonomy for two reasons: I wish to make sure that autonomous agents *are* in fact autonomous by giving them more steps to accomplish in order to count as such; I also want to make sure autonomous agents consider not simply if the values they endorse are good for them, but if these values undermine any substantial evidence to the contrary. In other words, I want a more objective “fact-checking”

process to be associated with and promoted by autonomy so a person does not make any incredible assumptions about her own values. Inspiring an agent to look deeper into what her values mean for her is what I think every account of autonomy should focus upon.

2.2 The Four C's

My account of autonomy begins with what I call “The Four C’s.” These are four different steps that function as additions to a basic procedural account of autonomy. Each of these steps takes account of not only the individual and how she is to reflect on and affirm her own values, but also the social network in which she is embedded. As I subscribe to relational autonomy as defining of individuals, I hold that a person is constituted by her engagement with the social world. Indeed, individuals could not develop values in the first place without the inculcation of ideas by parents, peers, and community—most importantly the ideas (and values) of deliberation and critique—and so a person must take account of *where* her values came from and *how* she is to be perceived in virtue of those values. Since we are surrounded by a social world, we strive to make sense of it and ourselves through what it has to offer.

The first C that I instruct is “consider one’s type.” This is a calling to what the author Mark Okrent discusses in his book *Rational Animals*. Non-human animals generally have biological components that constitute behavioral tendencies, and thus, in a sense, control what the animal does. These *natural* aspects of these non-human animals determine the *typing* of the animal. For example, a dog will characteristically perform a certain action in a certain situation, say, when it is attempting to raise its young. A dog will most likely keep watch of the puppies, make a certain habitat in which the puppies will reside, and consider a certain perimeter around the habitat that must not be crossed by a predator in order to be assured the puppies are safe.

These are all characteristic of a canine—it is the *type* “canine” that can provide us with information of predictable behavior that the dog will perform.

Humans, on the other hand, do not naturally belong to a type in the same manner that a canine does. We are characterized as being, paradoxically, absent of a type.³⁸ We, of course, are biological beings who have desires and impulses that are grounded in our very biology. However, we extend beyond this by having *reflection* as a primary faculty of the psyche. We are able to “distance” ourselves from ourselves by acknowledging and scrutinizing the values and desires we find inside of us. In other words, we can think about thinking, and we can think about ourselves in a separate way from being fully immersed in the outside world of perception.³⁹ Instead of merely focusing our attention on the world around us, we can focus it inward on ourselves, looking at not only the biological criteria that make us who we are but also the *social* criteria that constitutes what many people term “identity”: morals, values, relationships, character traits, and aspirations.

We must first recognize ourselves as primarily reflective beings who are capable of reflection and this “turning inward” of our attention. In this way, we can consider the values we have and compare them to other values as well as other resources given to us by our social network. I believe it is *essentially* human to have this reflective capacity. Humans are the only animals who have numerous advances that would not be possible without individual reflection, social acceptance and support of this reflection, and social teaching to newer generations about reflection: formal language, abstract concepts, morality, values, and individual identity. Hence, the common social idiom “Be yourself!” alludes to a reflective component in a person in that

³⁸ Mark Okrent, *Rational Animals: The Teleological Roots of Intentionality* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2007), 179.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 177.

one, in order to “be oneself”, must know what one’s self is; in order to find this out, one has to search oneself, i.e. reflect.

Not only is this capacity inherent to human beings (presuming the lack of any severe cognitive damage that would inhibit this function), we treat others as if they already contain it. We assume other people are similar to us insofar as they think about the world. Aside from extreme solipsistic accounts of existence, most people postulate that others all have their own aspirations, challenges, and concerns. Each person has a birth, an upbringing, a family, and friends who probably share similar interests—these interests themselves vary between people, and they are brought about through reflection on their importance to the person. When another person is driving in a car next to us, we consider her to have a reason to be in the car and be headed toward a particular destination. When we call upon a person to speak for herself and give justification for action, we assume the reasons she gives are reasons she endorses and ones that were brought about through reflection on why she should perform the action in the first place. It would conceivably not make sense to ask a person for justification if she were unable to ponder reasons for her action, especially action that requires extensive planning like writing a thesis or building a house.

I see reflection as grounding the possibility for autonomy, and so any human has this same possibility *in virtue of* being a human. It is by our nature that we are reflective, and, in a way, we are driven to *not* be driven by our biological constraints. As such, we define ourselves through means that do not (and should not) have such constraints, namely, our social world. We can reflect on the identities we find ourselves to have—we *find*, not *create* them because we are products of the learning environment in which we were, as children, initially embedded, as well as being modified by our social situations throughout life. I am in control of these values, but

they still have a source outside of myself. The values we gain are those of the community, and if I were born to a different group of people, I surely could have similar or drastically different values. By acknowledging the variation and diversity of values across different communities, we develop ourselves more and more with further life experience and interaction with alternative ideas and values. Even if we neglected to reflect upon our values initially, we would slightly (or drastically) change them over time depending on social circumstances. Adaptability is already an issue for humans, and reflection allows that adaptation to be more controlled and affirmed. The more active we are in cultivating the ideal we develop for ourselves, the closer we are to inhabiting the space in our social network that makes us feel comfortable and empowered.

Coupled with this conception of ourselves as fundamentally reflective, we, too, are what Diana Tietjens Meyers labels “intersectional identities.”⁴⁰ This term can be defined as illustrating the constitution of a person as an intersection of multiple social constraints and allowances in such a way as to enhance and diminish social possibilities and, indeed, autonomy. In simpler words, it contains the basic acknowledgement that a person manifests much of her identity as derived from social influence, i.e. relational autonomy. However, intersectional identities must also recognize the role social systems of domination and subordination play in the self-conceptions they have as well as how they view possibilities in the world.⁴¹ Some of these systems may include gender, race, class, and ethnicity. One’s identity is constructed from multiple perspectives originating from many different sources, and most certainly, one can alter this identity (to some degree) through reflection. In order to come to terms with the many

⁴⁰ Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 153.

sources of identity, one must first realize the influential power of group memberships and the often-conflicted goals each one might have.

The importance of recognizing oneself as intersectional cannot be overstated. It is common, especially in Western society, to believe each individual is merely an embodiment of certain classifications and characteristics that one either happens to be a part of or has affirmatively chosen to associate with. These of course make up part of one's identity, but the realization of their power is generally subsumed under the will of the person herself. For example, the reason a person puts forth for her being passed over for a job is that she neglected to show her possible employers why she was the best candidate for the position, not because she was part of a certain group. In this way, personal achievement is held to be more determinate of a person's success than her group memberships. But the will behind personal achievement, as was discussed in Chapter 1, is not of the atomistic sort, something that is entirely isolated from social influence. The groups we find ourselves a part of, and the ones that we actively subscribe to, determine how we relate to ourselves and others. There is no escaping the pressure to assume a particular stereotype or embody characteristics that are defining of a group—these are what our social world classifies as essential to that group. As such, we discover ourselves at a crossroads of identities, none of which is always more dominating than another.⁴² To manage them, we must reflect on the importance of each, why any are pertinent to our identities, and how they affect our lives.

Our reflective component goes hand in hand with realizing our intersectional identity. We may ponder the many groups that move us to become this or that, and we may consider how these groups might create differing objectives for a fulfilling life. One's self-conception no doubt

⁴² Ibid., 155.

involves the arduous task of revealing these influences to oneself, no matter how hidden they might be, so to make salient their strength and guiding power over what one considers worthwhile as a value. Such forces, as mentioned, include gender, race, class, and ethnicity, but can also be religion or political and ethical leanings that are present in one's upbringing and daily interaction with other people who are presumably affected similarly (and sometimes differently) by these same forces. Considering a person is of this intersectional and reflective type and extending this typing to other humans, the person is exposed to a wealth of ideas and values others might have that can be weighed against the ones a person finds herself to have. Ultimately, by being open and thoroughly exposed to a diverse group of resources—which hopefully will inevitably happen by a completion of the C's I list below—a person can make valued and trustworthy decisions based on factual information about the source of her values as well as the characteristics and implications of them.

This first C is especially important for autonomy because it sets out a conception of oneself that exposes the underpinning structures that influence one's behavior. If we acknowledge the groups to which we belong and how their membership may affect our decision-making process, then we can be more aware of the influences that go into the way we direct our lives. As an Italian-American, white, heterosexual male, a person will have a particular experience through a scope of options that are meaningful to this person's life as a member of these groups. By embodying his own identities, he will preclude having to choose options that are only appropriate for other combinations of identities. His specific combination affects the choices he has, the decisions he makes, and the methods by which he deliberates those decisions. His reflection is influenced by his group identities, and he must become aware of these forces in

order to know for sure why he has chosen the values he has and why some values emerge as more appropriate for him than others.

Keeping the first C in mind, the second C I wish to make a part of the procedural steps of autonomy is “consider one’s own values and commitments.” This is an obvious step that is included in all accounts of autonomy, so this is not so much an addition, but a reiteration. A person must “turn inward” and analyze what she values in life to see if those values are right for her. To figure out this “right”, she must determine if the values are important to her considering both her social relationships with others and her place in her community, as well as if they are based on good evidence. When I claim her social relationships and place in her community, I do not intend to refer to some sort of obligation she must uphold with others regardless of her own direction in life nor a *caste* system that maintains her values in accordance with what she is capable of in her social situation. It must be acknowledged that a person’s social position can graduate and degrade depending on what she takes as her values—and these values, of course, must not drastically affect the course of life for a person until she self-reflectively endorses them. As values and commitments are constituent of identity, they must be fully examined in order to find what oneself really *is*. A person can define herself by who she knows instead of what she knows, or by where she has been instead of where she wants to go. These are credible aspects of identity that one can consider, but they first must be seen as they are: *values and commitments*. Acknowledging this, one can move along the reflection process to determine what to do with them.

It could be helpful for a person to write down the values and commitments she finds herself to have. However, this would be a task that assumes a self-transparency that is not possible for most humans. Linda Barclay has summed this up by saying:

To be sure, not everything—values, desires, aspiration, aims—can be up for critical assessment at the same time. Something (most things) are usually held in place. Thus our values, insofar as they are relied on in reflection, are not themselves at that time subject to critical questioning. But it does not follow that at other times these values themselves are not subject to autonomous consideration.⁴³

As she states, we are not able to access all of ourselves at one single point in time. And this is why autonomy is always a *process*, not a goal that is achieved and merely attached to one's identity. We may ponder for days, months, or years over what we value and commit ourselves to; this is what autonomy means, to affirm, reconsider, and *reaffirm* one's values so to make one's life in accordance with them.

The third C I put forth is: “consider the source of one's values and commitments.” Many autonomy writers, mostly of relational autonomy backgrounds, cover such a topic;⁴⁴ however, I do not think it has been fleshed out as well as it could be. For one to consider the source of values and commitments, it is not enough to embrace the relational aspect of our lives. Simply acknowledging the social framework that gives our lives meaning as the source of much of our values does not cover actively considering the source of these values and *why* they are meaningful. One can think of many reasons why charity is a good thing (this is something that does not need to be spelled out). But what makes it a good thing does not stop with the person accepting that it is—what must be questioned is where that value came from. Was it the community in which one was raised that brought this idea to the forefront of the concept of a “good person?” Was there a traumatic event in one's life that instilled this value as something that should be upheld? Is it the realization of the number of impoverished people on city streets that led one to believe that charity is something worthwhile? There are a multitude of different

⁴³ Linda Barclay, “Autonomy and the Social Self,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 63.

⁴⁴ See e.g. Mackenzie and Stoljar, “Autonomy Reconfigured”; Linda Barclay, “Autonomy and the Social Self”; Diana Tietjens Meyers, “Intersectional Identity and the Authentic Self?: Opposites Attract!”; Susan Wolf, “Freedom Within Reason.”

experiences that could have spurred the endorsement of this idea. Indeed, it could have been promoted by parents and peers, but it also could have been developed independently of them. Discovering the origin of a value is important to understanding why a person finds it meaningful.

One cannot merely consider where a value came from, but also why is it important to hold. If a value is derived from one's parents, and one highly respects their opinions about that particular value, then surely one is more likely to accept that value *as* a value. The fact that the source was (presumably) present during childhood also factors into whether the value is accepted or rejected by the agent. Once recognition of the source is made, one must decipher if that value is important in itself. What makes this value a good value? Is it bolstered by my other values? This leads us down the road of self-reflection again, affirming my earlier statement that autonomy is always a process, not a destination.

Considering the source of a value is also crucial to exposing the validity of the source. If one figures out the origin of a particular value, one must decide if that source is credible, and if it is not, if the value is still important. For instance, if a person is exposed to and accepts the concept of charity from her parents, but she does not respect the reasons why her parents hold on to such a view (maybe they are selfish and want charity to only be done *for* them, but not the other way around), she must decide whether charity is a good thing in itself or if charity, because of how it can be misconstrued, is not worth saving. She might accept charity as a good thing and believe that her parents are merely jaded from either experience or ignorance of what charity is meant for. In this case, her parents, as the source of the value, lose their credibility, but the value of charity remains intact.

My main goal with this third C is to promote further questioning of values that is not present in Friedman's account of procedural autonomy. She stops short of considering a value's

source, the credibility of which I see as a determining factor as to whether that value is a good thing to uphold. Once again, when a person considers the value of charity, she must decide if the value is important in a number of ways: is it only good because of its consequences, or is the intention to be charitable also a good thing? Why is charity more important than other moral methods for relating to others? If a person is not charitable, is she automatically a worse person than myself? A person might recognize that the value of charity came from her association with a liberal political group, and since she trusts this group's goal of promoting social justice, she also trusts the group in holding charity as a value. A person might conclude, "We all are dependent on our social system for moral, economic, and psychological support. Without this system functioning, people will suffer in one or more ways. Suffering is a bad thing because it is painful. Charity, since it involves giving to the community, aids a person in getting the support they need. Therefore, charity can prevent suffering, and so it is a good thing to value." She has now verified both why the value is important to her and why the source empowers its importance.

The fourth C is "consider one's tacit peripheral group membership." When a person decides to uphold a value through the process that has been outlined, positive group memberships begin to emerge. A person who affirms motherhood as a value will share many similarities to other people who also have that same value as part of their identities. These people may share stories and advice, aiding each in maintaining the value. Motherhood might be even more of a value, for instance, for a woman who shares a story of her own mother abandoning her (this, no doubt, has affected the way she herself sees motherhood). The groups to which one will belong due to value endorsement make the values stronger and more significant, especially since membership will be taping into the social aspect of ourselves that makes autonomy meaningful.

Although some group memberships will be embraced as good consequences of holding certain values, other group memberships might not be. Because our social network is so diverse, many groups tend to overlap each other. So, even though a person wishes to be a part and be recognized as a member of a specific group, this does not mean that that same person might not also be lumped into another group she wholeheartedly despises. For example, if a person portrays herself as a “woman” by redefining the traditional conception based on certain feminist revisions of what that identity means, the person cannot wholly forego being assumed to be a part of the traditional category (with all of its characteristics) of “woman.” Although some similarities might be present (e.g. physicality, empathy, motherhood, et cetera), this does not mean that these two categories are entirely synonymous. Thus, a person must also consider these other group memberships that she is a part of in virtue of the values she holds.

I would label these other, unwanted group memberships “negative memberships.” The reason for this is because they are, clearly, unwanted and are based on the assumption of how a person defines herself without fully considering the person’s own views on being a part of that group. I also classified these memberships as peripheral—this is to imply that they are based on merely limited characteristics of the positive group that happen to be shared by the negative group. If motherhood is still strongly associated with the reconfigured definition of “woman” the person wishes to manifest, it cannot be denied that others might see her as still being a part of the common definition of “woman” that the person had primarily been fighting against, and they will most likely treat her as such. The peripheral groups one is presumed to support are an influential determinant as to whether a person wishes to still retain her new group membership or whether to relinquish it due to its affiliations.

These negative memberships are also tacit in their attribution to a person. Many times the positive group memberships have fundamental characteristics that are so important to the group identity that they are simply taken for granted. What is at issue here is that by *assuming* them as necessary constituents of this group and not questioning their fundamental quality, a person might be affirming the same grounding characteristic that is a part of an unwanted, possibly unknown, and sometimes conflicting group. Even if a person questions the validity of a fundamental characteristic of a group she wishes to be a part of, it might be in the same position in another group that she does not want to be identified with. Indeed, even by affirming a positive group membership, she might still have to “bite the bullet” and take this negative membership along with her. The acknowledgment and awareness of the peripheral and tacit group memberships allows for a person to analyze and choose her memberships according to what she really wishes to be as well as what she will inevitably be recognized to be by others.

I have conceived a shorthand version of my method of inquiry into the validity of one’s values. It is comprised of four different aspects that stem from an initial question: What, Why, Where, and How. The first, *What*, deals with enumerating the values and commitments we find ourselves to have. This involves reflection on ourselves—the turning inward of our perspective—so to see what we already find significant and meaningful. Logically, the next question, *Why*, is geared toward the purpose of these values. What role do these values play in my life? Why are they important to me? The third question, *Where*, asks us to find the source of the values. Does the source’s validity affect the significance of the value? Could this value come from another source? The fourth question, *How*, seeks to determine the method of transportation of the values and commitments to the agent. Surely, the values did not merely appear in a person’s head, but rather came from a particular source that used certain methods for instilling

these values in the person herself. Were these values transferred to me via a parent, teacher, peer, et cetera? Were the methods of transportation of these values credible and uncoerced? Could there be any reason to doubt how and why I learned these values? Each of these questions is intended to supplement the Four C's and aid in the rational consideration of them.

I have laid out some of my revisions to the standard procedural account of autonomy. What is most noteworthy in my account is that reflection holds a primary position, and without such a step in the autonomous process, I do not believe autonomy is possible. If a person did not reflect on her values and commitments, she would actively be living ignorantly of what she really wants. In place of her *real*, or one might say *honestly endorsed*, values is a façade of what she wishes to hold as defining of herself. The most obvious point she would be missing is that her values and commitments are only wishful thinking, and wishful to the point of lacking firm ground in the true identity of the person. I should say that I do not believe every person, even while diving into procedural autonomy, is transparent to herself entirely. There are aspects of a person's life that may remain hidden depending on what she is doing or with which group she sides on an issue. Furthermore, certain influential social identities a person contains, even though known, might be diminished in importance for the sake of another, more pressing identity that is relevant to a situation at hand.⁴⁵ Such is the case of a woman, priding herself on her individual merit and achievement, taking these as determinant factors of her success; she refuses to give credence to affirmative action based on sex, gender, or race as aiding her achievements. Thus, her focus is to frame emphasis around what she has done as an individual presumably without the help of these other groups that share a part of her identity.

⁴⁵ Meyers, 160.

2.3. The Four C's and Sexism

Reflection, clearly, requires rational competency. As I see that every human is capable of reflection, this makes it necessary that every human also be capable of rationality. This, for me, is defining of humans and is why the utmost respect for a person should stem from her ability to rationalize and decide for *herself* what she wishes to pursue in life. Since I take this as the case, what do we do about systems of oppression and subjugation, like totalitarian regimes, sexism, and racism? At the outset, one might make the argument that, if we are to respect the rational competency of humans, then we are to respect the choices they have made in regards to these systems of thought. However, it is not only the choices that led to these systems that matter to autonomy, but the social structure that empowered these systems to be supported and made standard. The freedom of choice is not to be assaulted here, but rather the freedom to make uninformed—e.g. coerced, manipulated, or (self-) deceptive—choices.

Sexism inherently undermines autonomy. It appeals to values that subscribe to false foundations for the appropriation of characteristics to men and women. By nature, women are to be feminine, according to sexism, and they are also weaker than men. And so, the lifestyles, occupations, and personal endeavors that women can seek must be in line with these views. However, women (nor men) must hold to these standards of femininity and masculinity—rather, these traits are human traits that can be embodied by anyone. By precluding possibilities for oneself because of a misguided view of such things as gender, one manifests values through self-deception. The environments that would put these constraints on a person generally do not allow deliberation or revision of the values that empower it. As such, by repressing reflection on the values *themselves* as credible or not, these systems necessarily prevent autonomy.

With sexism in mind, I believe this slightly modified and amended conception might bring hope for actualizing autonomy. We first took note of our reflective and relational character—the aspects of *any* human being—that is interconnected with many social influences that contribute not only to our conceptions of ourselves, but also to the lenses through which we see the world. In other words, we are primed to be and perform in certain ways conducive to the social networks in which we are embedded. Once we acknowledged this fundamental piece of ourselves, we analyze the values and commitments we find ourselves to have. In so doing, we reflect on them, not only stopping at if they are important to us but also scrutinizing their validity with respect to other values in the world. This further compels us to consider the sources of our values and commitments to decipher if these sources are as credible as we think they are to make the claims on those values. Finally, once we have endorsed and understood which values and commitments are important to us, we take special care to assess, by way of our own chosen group memberships, which groups we might belong to accidentally, and we decide how this affects the endorsement of our values and commitments.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I attempted to unpack my own conception of autonomy and explain how I believe it to be more sufficient than the two critiqued in the first chapter. I combined structural elements from procedural accounts of autonomy with the substantive limit that no autonomous account may allow bigoted belief systems like sexism and racism. These systems undermine autonomy by preventing an agent full access to her reflective capabilities. Without the ability to fully comprehend one's own values (which includes the source of the values), one is incapable of fully endorsing them. In the end, if we are to accept autonomy as a value worth pursuing, we

must encourage the freedom to revise one's own values at any time possible as well as preclude any emergence of bigoted belief systems that block autonomous function. Autonomy is only possible once a person has gained a decent amount of control over her life.

CHAPTER 3. GENDER'S CURRENT LIMITS ON AUTONOMY

3.1 Introduction

The biological ends that humans manifest are in place solely for survival. We are hard-wired to want to eat, drink, sleep, and have sex so to assure our species' continuation on this planet. The reasons we developed these ends are instrumentally good: by encouraging certain behavior that is conducive to survival, we can bring about a state of affairs that allows us not only to continue to exist, but to grow as a species. By massing people together in large groups (with the help of sociality), accessibility to basic drive satisfaction like eating and drinking is easier, and so we reallocate much of our time to developing other methods of pleasure, most of which are found in culture.

Even though biological end satisfaction is important, many of the choices we make in life deal with our social existence. What job to take, what house to buy, what music to listen to, what political party to be a part of—all of these involve *relational* components. We judge our own success by how it compares to the success of others; we consider others' opinions when we are making decisions; and we find meaning in ourselves by seeking goals that can be accomplished in our environments. It is defining of our social selves that we not only form who we are in accordance with what is acceptable, but also what we find important. Values and commitments, as elucidated in the last chapter, are derived from social sources; in other words, we are influenced by what is available to determine what a good thing to value is and commit to. Our goals and aspirations are given to us as choices by the society in which we live. What we become, then, is part of what we are exposed to. But this is too simple: rather, what we become

is both what we are exposed to as well as what is supported by our community as a worthwhile life.

Nearly every community uses gender to separate people into two main groups. This separation is based on sex—the anatomical differences between people are extended to the social and behavioral realms to explain what each sex is supposed to be like. These sexes, female and male, are then embodied in these latter two worlds as woman and man, respectively. As groups are built on this fundamental separation, any identity that is built on top of it has constituent of it the gender of the individual. Job applications, government census reports, and other methods of collecting personal data generally all ask for this information—it is something to be expected of people, that they are one or the other. A person is now not just a doctor, but one who is a man or woman. Even language has signifiers like personal pronouns that dictate an either/or separation, a seemingly basic constitution of an individual. And so, identity is not simply a job, a last name, or a race: it is all of these as embodied in a man or woman.

In this chapter, I aim to expose why biology is not a determiner of gender. As it is conceived, gender maps onto the biological categories of sex: man is to male as woman is to female. I will first give a brief explanation of sex and gender. After this preliminary preparation, I wish to charitably explicate the biological deterministic position of gender along with the seemingly strong evidence for it. Then I plan to dismantle it by showing that, although gender and sex seem to have much in common, they only appear this way because we have *made* them appear as such. I will explain why this conception is not only wrong but it also pigeonholes society into two categories that are made up of extremely different traits. To express the process of gender reification, I will explain the way society creates and perpetuates gender norms by means of both behavioral expectations as well as a masking of subversive information that could

unseat society's "evidence" for its conception of gender. Finally, I will critique the biological deterministic conception of gender by illustrating its propensity to sexism and how this is a root cause of the social and occupational problems related to gender and autonomy that are commonplace today.

3.2 The Appeal to Sex

First, what do I mean when I say "sex" or "gender"? "Sex" I term as the biological criteria used to differentiate males and females. Candace West and Don Zimmerman have a similar definition but take it one step further: "Sex is the determination made through the application of socially agreed upon biological criteria for classifying persons as females or males."⁴⁶ The criteria, according to them, are not necessarily based upon a natural order of separation between the sexes, but are rather the *consensus* of criteria that mark this separation. I admit that sex has a place in nature as differentiating two categories of the same type of living thing that join together in some way to reproduce. It cannot be denied that every animal has a sexual relationship to others of its kind in this way. Even plants have sexed parts, one part producing a certain chemical or functioning in a certain way, while the other doing an equal but opposite task. In this way, plants and animals "spread the seed" in one way or another to assure the survival of their species. West and Zimmerman intend, though, that the most important aspect to keep in mind is how these sex criteria in humans count as such because they are *socially* agreed upon.

Gender, on the other hand, according to West and Zimmerman, "is the activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities

⁴⁶ Candace West and Don H. Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," *Gender & Society* 1 (1987): 127.

appropriate for one's sex category."⁴⁷ Cecilia Ridgeway and Shelley Correll illustrate a similar yet more pessimistic definition: "[It] is an institutionalized system of social practices for constituting people as two significantly different categories...and organizing social relations of inequality on the basis of that difference."⁴⁸ Gender is not as much an existential component to one's identity as hair color, familial last name, or legal citizenship might be—rather, gender is based on, and entirely perpetuated by, *performance*. It is a sort of “display” that is used to represent the sexual natures we wish (or *believe*) we have.⁴⁹ For the sake of my discussion of gender, the reader must understand that I conceive of gender as an entirely social activity. In this sense, gender only is ascribed as an identificatory display because society believes it to be so. A person *becomes* a gender by her personal performance as well as the social recognition and appropriation of that performance. Hence, gender is important only insofar as it is made *intelligible* as representing a concept that is already fully embraced by the culture.

Our Western society propagates the simple “ideal” of male/man and female/woman by alluding to the seemingly credible biological evidence for this mimetic relationship between the “sex” and “gender” terms. In nature, as society would say, there are only two types of sexed individuals, and likewise, we will socially recognize these same two individuals. Nature is assumed to operating on a very fundamental and crude system of two basic variables: on and off. We can see this with such all-or-nothing dichotomies as life/death, up/down, in/out, and so on. If this is so, the most elementary difference between things is based on something either fully having a characteristic or not—there is no in-between to be accounted for. Thus, since sex seems quite fundamental, we might assume as well that this, too, would operate with this simple

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cecilia L. Ridgeway and Shelley J. Correll, “Unpacking the Gender System,” *Gender & Society* 18 (2004): 510.

⁴⁹ West and Zimmerman, 130.

distinction. And indeed, if we look at the anatomy of males and females and their differences, it would be difficult to not take these *empirical* facts as truly being a representation of the basic on/off relationship. And so, socially, why should we assume that men and women are any different?

It would be beneficial for our discussion to look at a brief explanation of the common conception of the relationship of sex to gender outlined by West and Zimmerman:

In Western societies, the accepted cultural perspective on gender views women and men as naturally and unequivocally defined categories of being (Garfinkel 1967, pp. 116-18) with distinctive psychological and behavioral propensities that can be predicted from their reproductive functions. Competent adult members of these societies see differences between the two as fundamental and enduring—differences seemingly supported by the division of labor into women's and men's work and an often elaborate differentiation of feminine and masculine attitudes and behaviors that are prominent features of social organization. Things are the way they are by virtue of the fact that men are men and women are women—a division perceived to be natural and rooted in biology, producing in turn profound psychological, behavioral, and social consequences. The structural arrangements of a society are presumed to be responsive to these differences.⁵⁰

Aspects of sex that are used to justify gender are commonly known. Anatomy, chromosomes, and hormones are all the top contenders for verifiable characteristics of a person that prove which sex that person is. But these work on a major assumption: nature is concrete and unchanging. One can analyze the anatomy of females and make the correct judgment that they all have the same structures. But this does not mean that anatomy has not changed over time. Humans have adaptive capacities, and surely these capacities have been exercised in order for people to better thrive in their environments. It is a misnomer to assume that humans cannot physically, mentally, or emotionally adapt or change, that what we see is what we get.

Nature is not a single, unchanging, fixed system, but rather an “open” system of development that pushes along certain characteristics of beings that might be beneficial to

⁵⁰ Ibid., 127-8.

success in their environments. This is at the heart of evolutionary thinking. Considering sex specifically, we can see that there is not a *single* way for a male to be and a female to be. The assumption of an on/off configuration of nature cannot be maintained. For example, hermaphrodites contain both anatomical parts at birth (sex assignment surgery is generally performed to make the person one sex or another) and transgendered individuals like Foucault's Herculine⁵¹ bend the lines of a stark male/female distinction. Even abnormalities such as Klinefelter's Syndrome (also known as XXY Syndrome) illustrate that even chromosomes are not so clear cut, expressing the varied degree of development on a wide range of levels in a person.

I argue that it is not the *actual* biological realm that we motion toward for justification of gender and the subsequent identity and behavioral inclinations that come from it—rather, we direct attention to a “human nature” that is wholly based in a *gendered biology*. By this phrase I mean to imply that the defining characteristics we ascribe to sex are only extended to sex itself when we make assumptions based on certain behavioral cues that we *wish* to be essential to the sexes. It is a conception of nature that, by way of confirmation bias, proves exactly what we want to see in order to justify our positions regarding the “naturalness” of “manliness” and “womanliness.”

Gendered biology reflects what we already believe. By seeking out information that proves us right—and “seeing” information in nature that also confirms our intuitions—we cannot fail in justifying ourselves in thinking that females and women are synonymous, and the same for males and men. We provide our own failsafe to prevent any serious doubt. For us, nature just *is*,

⁵¹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 127.

and we are merely interpreting it like any observer would. But if interpretation is based on subjectivity and, of course, personal bias, can we really call our interpretations neutral?

What makes a man a man, by what I have just explained, is his ability to conform his actions with those that are appropriate for males to perform. The assumption that a man is always a male allows for a quick checklist of behavior, attire, and modes of thinking a man would typically have. Using the example given by West and Zimmerman, a person might be wearing a suit and tie, and one may assume this person has the sex criteria of male in virtue of his attire.⁵² The suit and tie function as *insignias* to demonstrate essential characteristics of the person, that only a male (or man) would wear such things. This creates predictability among the genders. This same man might also gauge himself by evaluating how close his behavior and conceptions of the world align with what he believes constitute the ideal male. If a male, decreed by the gender system, is supposed to view women (and thus females) in an inferior light, then so be it—who is the man to judge the system and attempt to make amendments to it? He can make minute changes that affect his own perceptions of the world, but he still operates within the larger framework that outlines the limitations of the definition of “man.” As Judith Butler claims, “These limits [of gender] are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what the language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender.”⁵³

This hegemonic conception of gender permits only certain intelligible ways of conceiving others. For instance, if this same man we have discussed aligned his self-conception with the behaviors and modes of thinking that are traditionally characteristic of women, the man would

⁵² West and Zimmerman, 132.

⁵³ Butler, 12.

not then be labeled a “woman”; instead, he would be “gay”, as being effeminate as a male categorizes one not as the other gender but as a deficient mode of one’s own gender (deficient because this is how our society sees it). And this is what this conception of gender does: the ironic stripping away of personal identity for the sake of keeping and defining every person by a “standard” gender system precludes any signification of the self that is entirely exempt from gender, especially one’s *own* gender. A man no longer has the option to be a man or woman—instead, he can only choose to be either a man (the “neutral” term for a heterosexual male) or a gay man. His choices, as it were, hit a glass ceiling.

A person does not lose all power to identify herself as she wishes, though. Gender works from two perspectives, that of others and that of the self. Although the number of genders is stipulated by the society as a whole, a person still has the ability to assign any gender to herself at any point. She may appropriate to herself characteristics such as behavior, attire, or signifying language of the gender she wishes to be—in this way, she displays herself to others as she wants. The number of genders might be limited, but gender identity is a choice made by the person herself. Others might perceive her a certain way, but this does not necessarily mean she has to view *herself* in this fashion. Self-definition is what is crucial to gender identity.

So far I have given an overview of the current gender system and where I believe it to be incorrect. The picture we paint of gender divides people into two categories that are supposed to accurately represent sexual nature, the presumed fundamental component of all humans. What has occurred, however, is not a representation of people as themselves, but an *imprint* of what we wish to believe about ourselves. However, these categories—and even the presumed mimicry of gender to sex—are social fabrications encouraged by feeble desires to create concise definitions of people. It is certainly uncanny to think of people exempt of sexual signification.

3.3 Society's Function in Gender Reification

We have seen the argument from nature fail—in fact, it turns out to merely be a posturing of *gendered biology*. Likewise, the concept of gender is set up to reinforce this view. One way society perpetuates this façade is to control what information is accepted by the majority to keep the (social) system running smoothly. This refers to an instantiation of groupthink, most often passed to other members (especially children) by way of roles, norms, and expectations.

On a local level, when a person in a group decides to stray from the roles and tasks assigned to her, she impedes the efficiency of the system. So when a woman does not subscribe to and perform the tasks that are given to her *as a woman*, her immediate surroundings begin to shift, making it explicit that she is not performing as she *should*. Similar to Heidegger's broken hammer,⁵⁴ the environment develops a *break* in normalcy, and the local social system around her recognizes the tear in the status quo.

Because of our established social characteristics as human beings, we keep tabs on our behavior as it fits with those of others. We wish to mesh well with the actions of others so to be accepted by our community. Humans have good reason to think this way, too: without adhering to the norms of a group, we lose our standing and could be cast out of the group for good. This is why we are so susceptible to the influence of our society. And by rattling the cage of gender norms, we leave open the possibility of not being as firmly situated in our social environment as we once believed, making us more weary whether we really are meshing with the group or not. Traditions are now held *qua* traditions because of their familiarity, not because of their

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie et al. (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 102.

correctness. We strive to maintain our personal positions within our society. It appears the “objective” statuses of our gender norms are showing their subjective roots.

Social goods, like norms, are policed by the people themselves. We as a group wish to control behavior for two reasons: to prevent behavior that violates societal norms and to assure our own place in the recognized social order. Culturally, we use a combination of expectations and common understanding to push people to hold onto the beliefs of gender. It is a classic case of the social world overriding the individual. Ridgeway and Correll put it concisely:

These abstract, hegemonic understandings of men and women are roughly consensual in that virtually everyone in the society knows what they are (Eagly, Wood, and Diekmann 2000; Fiske et al. 2002) and likely expects that most others hold these beliefs. Therefore, as individuals enter public settings that require them to define themselves in relation to others, their default expectation is that others will treat them according to hegemonic gender beliefs. In this way, these hegemonic beliefs act as implicit rules of the gender game in public contexts.⁵⁵

This gender order has been a part of our society for a long time. We shape our own behavior around what others of our “type” do. We empower ourselves through the gender system to remain intelligible to others by maintaining expectations and prevent ostracization of ourselves (and so prevent embarrassment).

Nature is presumed to be impartial, and thus, objective to our concerns for gender; in other words, nature only appears to us as it is, and we are the ones who interpret it. The information provided by nature proves exactly what we wish to see, that our current gender system—with the flaws, misappropriations of behavior, and ideals of masculine and feminine intact—is confirmed to be based on *facts* about ourselves, about our human natures. The concepts it supplies now seem sufficiently unbiased, and therefore we can trust them. And so we push information that is “true” through the guise of “nature.”

⁵⁵ Ridgeway and Correll, 513.

Unfortunately, instead of us extracting information from nature and deploying its apparent dichotomy of the sexes onto our gender system, we perform the opposite: we take the common conception of the separation of gender and apply it to nature. We reinforce this attribution process by both appealing to what we decide is a natural order, which is contrived by our current gender system as a basis for its establishment and subsequent continuation, and—most detrimentally—by appealing also to a groupthink ideology that tacitly takes advantage of our need to not be opposed to our communities for fear of ostracization.

We as a society hold to our gendered beliefs through a fabricated “before” that is used to posit the inevitable attribution of sexual properties to gender. Even though society allows many different acceptable forms of life for men and women, it precludes any drastic, fundamental reconfigurations or alterations to the content of “man” and “woman” themselves. Basically, society will allow a woman or man to operate in nearly any conceivable way (which is determined by what society attributes as acceptable) just so long as they do not question or alter the foundation for these concepts of gender. Forms of life a person can embody are conditioned on a person *first* accepting the “factual” elements of gender—only then can one own a business “like a woman/man” or be a nurse “like a woman/man” (it is interesting to note the terms “female doctor” and “male nurse” are in common practice due to the apparent “exceptions to the rule” that they signify).⁵⁶

Society’s attempts to promote openness and tolerance are conditional on the acceptance of the limits it sets out to begin with. In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler claims that “the presumed universality and unity of the subject of feminism [women] is effectively undermined

⁵⁶ West and Zimmerman, 129.

by the constraints of the representational discourse in which it functions.”⁵⁷ The representational discourse Butler alludes to is the system in which we make people out to be intelligible, the gender system. We can see that we already have pre-defined linguistic terminology that is based on gender difference like ‘she’ and ‘he’ (indeed, other Romance languages besides English—like Spanish, Italian, or French—even gender objects). Women are stuck in a bind: they are presumed to have a collective identity that unites them all together under the banner of “women.”; however, this presumed identity is merely a fabrication made by the system that is intended to free them: “[T]he feminist subject turns out to be discursively constituted by the very political system that is supposed to facilitate its emancipation.”⁵⁸ What happens is a representation of an identity without the justification for the initial creation of that identity—hence, it is a tacit “before” that is used for justification.

3.4 Gender in Practice

I have claimed so far, in so many words, that the current gender system is misinformed and incorrect. But I have yet to give extensive evidence of this system being problematic in practice. The ultimate goal of my analysis and critique of gender is twofold: by reconfiguring gender and applying its actual attributes to practice, we can inspire a rethinking and hopefully an elimination of sexism and its dangers; and with a proper definition of gender, we can extend its conceptual characteristics to other social concepts such as race and class so to recognize not only the constraints they puts on our own self-definitions, but how, once we realize their power, we can harness them and make them our own through autonomy. Here I allude to my first C in the

⁵⁷ Butler, 6.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 3.

last chapter, that of the intersectional identity theory put forth by Diana Tietjens Meyers. Our self-conceptions manifest at the metaphorical crossroads of a multitude of different identities that both empower and oppress us. By managing these identities and sifting through them accordingly, we can configure them to *represent* us as we want to be seen.

The biological basis of gender no doubt leads to sexism. By maintaining a *gendered biology*, we uphold certain positions of power between genders that is dictated by this order. If nature prescribes the structure of sexual relations, and if gender mimics or is the social representation of sex, then we *ought* to support the power relations that appear in nature. This holds, of course, only on the presupposition of the nature our flawed gender system posits.

Not all events within social relationships employ gender as the main determiner of action.⁵⁹ Using Meyers' intersectional identity, it can be seen once again that gender is no more determinant of the self than race, class, or ethnicity, as each matters more at particular times depending on the issue in which one is involved.⁶⁰ Even so, as it is made out to be a fundamental characteristic of the separation of human beings, it is still a part of a person's own conception (and/or society's conception) of herself. There are two general situations in which gender becomes most apparent and in which a struggle *against* gender becomes exceedingly difficult.⁶¹ gender is salient in contexts that imply a sexual difference and in activities that have already been "gender-typed" as being appropriate for one or the other gender based on certain abilities and characteristics that are required for the job. Since we assume the connection of women to females, we socially structure and perceive situations in a loaded way: the behaviors, worldviews, and concepts of self-identity that permeate the gender category also permeate the

⁵⁹ Ridgeway and Correll, 515.

⁶⁰ Meyers, 155.

⁶¹ Ridgeway and Correll, 517.

sex category, and vice versa. This means that possible hierarchical differences, character traits, and skillsets are seamlessly transferred from one grouping to the other. We will see below that this affects perceived competence in numerous avenues: competency in performance, morality, and self-valuation.

Gender posits and empowers certain assumptions to be made about human's sexual criteria and the subsequent categories that people are placed in by virtue of them. These criteria provide qualifications that allow judgment to be passed on which sex a person is. Attributing sex to a person—biological and anatomical typing—is believed to be an unconscious and automatic process performed by most humans when they first encounter another person.⁶² What I mean by this is that humans have a tendency to want to know the sex of a person, to want to acknowledge the sexual parts a person has. Due to sex's perceived binary constitution, it is an either/or classification. It seems a quick answer that would explain a lot of someone's behavior. Of course, since gender is tied closely with sex, this also means we would be assuming much more than we really are getting from sex classification.

Through a study of self-other competence expectations, we can see that evaluations of a person's assertiveness as well as general performance at a task are affected by gender.⁶³ Evaluating assertiveness is a method of determining the influence one has on a group. The likelihood that a man will be more assertive and eager to contribute his opinion to a conversation is higher than that of a woman. This, in turn, illustrates who is more likely to speak and more likely to listen (and be listened to) in a conversation, especially when the conversation is situated within a group activity. The ideas and points of view that are given adequate attention by the rest

⁶² Ridgeway and Correll, 514; West and Zimmerman, 129.

⁶³ Ridgeway and Correll, 518.

of the group stem from *who* is giving them.⁶⁴ The gender salience determines who speaks, whose ideas are heard, and how influential these ideas are to the topic at hand.

Performance evaluation, though, is the most obvious form of sexism that stems from this incorrect gender system. When a woman performs a particular activity, the evaluation of her actions, even if the outcome is exactly the same, is generally lower than that of a man. Likewise, fields of study such as engineering and mathematics are thought of as appropriate for men rather than women, and so the expectation of a woman to perform the exact same job is diminished from the start. Indeed, women at times almost must perform *better* than men just to appear on equal grounds as them.⁶⁵ Beyond speculated skills, actual performance is altered by gender expectations. If a woman is perceived to be less competent at a task, her performance will generally be accompanied by higher rates of stress, leading to her performance being lower than that of a man.⁶⁶ Conversely, if one is considered part of a superior gender, i.e. men, then confidence and performance actually increase.

Another peculiar aspect of sexism that stems from gender is the moral competence ascribed to men and women. Generally, men are considered more rational and logic-oriented than women. Due to this, men are commonly thought of as problem solvers who, by nature, are *meant* to find solutions. However, what is interesting is that sometimes women's moral competence is considered higher than a man's, an idea known as "angel in the house."⁶⁷ It assumes that, by way of the intuition women are supposed to have, they have clearer and less jaded insight into moral situations. However, what is ironic is that, although gender is used to empower women in this respect, it is also used to limit what they can do with this ability.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 519.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 518.

⁶⁷ Friedman, 64.

Conceiving women as politicians is bizarre because of their “fragile” natures: although women have perceived higher moral competence under this view, they are also highly susceptible to the corruption of the political system. Thus, the “fragility” postulated by our common conception of women transcends physicality and enters moral stability. Then women, it could be fathomed, are only morally superior because they are *naïve* and secluded in the house. Obviously, the “angel in the house” idea undermines itself and ultimately attributes less moral competence to women, especially since competence is almost necessarily involved with its application.

The fact that gender segregation based on sex is prevalent throughout our society means that even if one were to attempt to wholly overhaul the system by redefining what she *is* as a woman, the costs she would have to endure would be so great that she would feel that her intentions were not worth giving up her entire livelihood. Women are held to certain stereotypes (and held down by similar ones): a woman must be pretty, dress well, take care of herself, be sensual, apprehensive, not outspoken, studious and diligent but not intelligent, intuitive and perceptive, et cetera. She must understand that her “place” is beneath a man physically, occupationally, socially, psychologically, and sexually. She defines herself in terms of how she relates to others (including herself) instead of the skills and knowledge she has acquired over her lifetime. A woman is to find comfort in groups, not in isolation, and she is to form the support structure of our society—the man is the achiever while she is the one who encourages him to do so.

It can be fathomed that, since women generally form the support structure of our social world, they embody an “accommodationist” position. By this term, I mean women are typically taught to care for others, to be tolerant of different beliefs, and to respect other people’s opinions. They are supposed to be a part of something, to stand by something, to maintain relationships

and close personal ties to others.⁶⁸ Warmth, gentleness, understanding, and compassion are all stereotypical feminine qualities. Women more than men have traditionally been thought of as emotional and sociable, whereas men are independent and competitive.⁶⁹ This illustrates the divide in conceptions of the traits women and men are to embody.

In virtue of these traits, we could make the assumption women typically are to be group-focused. Women who concentrate too much on an individual or themselves gain a number of different negative references: self-centered, impolite, too forward, playing favorites, and especially the question, “Are you having relations with that person?”, as if her caring specifically for another implies sexual relations. If she holds her own opinion to be more worthy and greater than others, she pejoratively is labeled a “bitch.” By analogy to geographical conquest, a woman is supposed to go into town and convince the locals why they should let her rule over them—her emphasis is on social connectivity and understanding. This is contrasted to a more masculine approach, as a man should simply “divide and conquer”, undercut anything in the way, and overrun the city by authoritarian expression of power. Indeed, the archetype of the “self-made man” illustrates this.⁷⁰ He takes, she compromises.

The woman, inevitably, takes a “sideline” position in a conversation, as she is meant to listen and make room in her own argument for others. She is supposed to ask questions, not answer them, and as such she eventually becomes “stagnate” in her thinking, always being stuck in the questioning phase of inquiry. The man, since he is “naturally” more practical and solution-focused, is the one who develops and puts forth the answer. He, instead of being stagnate, occupies a “progressive” position. He looks at a problem, deciphers a solution, and acts upon it.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 99.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 171.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91.

While the woman is supposed to find the problem initially (a good example is a heterosexual relationship, where she is generally the first to speak of an issue that is bothering her), the man is the one she goes to for advice. She seeks his guidance for answers (is she specifically taught to or does it develop this way as secondary to the original training of women and men?), and he is more than willing to give them—after all, both have specific positions in our gender system they must uphold to be so-called “normal.” This description, of course, is definitive of our current gender system. The stratification of people into two genders seems to lead to a polarization of behaviors, expectations, and character traits.

With this in mind, we can quickly evaluate the occupations that are deemed appropriate for either gender. Women, as supportive and accommodating, are to be directed, following instruction on what to do (since “what to do” usually is the solution) that is generally given by a man. As such, secretaries, paralegals, and entry-level positions are appropriate. A woman who makes it to the top of a directive chain is seen as an anomaly, a fluke in the system; the most often reason given for this is that she embodies not feminine characteristics, but *masculine* ones. This means she is independent, self-directing, ambitious, solution-focused, and a “progressive” conqueror. This begs the question, why can these traits, as she is a female (and also a woman in this instance), not be feminine? Simple: this is not the “natural” order of things. Likewise, men taking directions, working under other men, and performing menial tasks are considered either “less than men” or gay. These men are a degradation of male—they have not reached the “alpha male” potential.

3.5 Conclusion

I have attempted to cover three main areas of gender in this chapter: the traditional view of the mimetic relationship of gender to sex, the methods by which society instantiates and maintains this relationship, and the inevitable sexism that results from it. The gender/sex connection has profound effects on the way people see themselves and others. The norms and expectations upheld by citizens are justified by the common gender stereotypes that are considered to be average and normal representations of human beings. Because of this status, these stereotypes do not appear overtly problematic, and this prevents a proper rethinking of their consequences.

We can now see the outcome of these gender limitations. Ironically, especially in a part of the world that prides itself on individuality, people are evaluated by their group memberships more than their personal characteristics or abilities. Tacit guidelines are in place to ensure gender adherence, and breaks from this “norm” create weird identities that most people wish to merely force into one of the already established genders. This is one reason transsexuals are stigmatized and, unfortunately, avoided. The intelligibility of people, then, rests on their fitting into a socially acceptable norm.

The sexism that comes into play in our society, I state, is from the biological deterministic view of gender, which is derived from the view that our social world is guided by biology. Not only this, but biology is speculated to contain static character traits of the sexes that are unchanging, that the male and female brains are truly different in construction and neuro-pathways. On the contrary, it makes evolutionary sense that our brains have developed to process a multitude of tasks that we encounter in our environments, tasks that stretch across the *entire*

spectrum of human identity. Thus, our old traditions of binary gender association are exceedingly limiting and uncharitable to the abilities of human cognition and creativity. If anything is holding back progress, it is the retention of archaic ideas of gender.

CHAPTER 4. GENDER AND AUTONOMY: A RESOLUTION

4.1 Introduction

In my thesis, I have expressed concerns over the definition and application of autonomy. I suggested that Friedman's procedural account failed to satisfy necessary substantive requirements. Because of the lack of judgment on the content of values, oppressed and sexist groups could potentially count as autonomous, two key areas I see as undermining Friedman's theory of autonomy. Likewise, I believe Wolf's conception was inadequate because it took too much for granted and seemingly gave no separation between upbringing and adult independence. She discredited people from bad upbringings as unable to access reason and truth, and so they could not be responsible for their behavior. Even if access to reason and truth did permit responsibility, I do not think this sufficiently entails that this is all that is required for autonomy.

In place of these theories, I employed my own conception. I borrowed structural ideas from procedural accounts along with substantive guidelines for restrictions on content. I believe that procedural accounts need to go further than what Friedman expressed; qualifications such as considering one's type as a reflective and intersectional being and considering the source of one's values are imperative for honest reflection. Sufficient information must be accessible to permit a firm decision to support a value. Moreover, sexism and racism, two forms of bigotry, are not permitted alongside autonomy. These belief systems entail diminished reflection, thus preventing substantial access to the entire content and history of one's values. Likewise, these beliefs purport false ideas about the criteria by which to judge others—for example, reducing a human's ability and identity to biological characteristics that might or might not actually affect a

person's true ability. This thinking promotes unwarranted generalizations of entire populations without consideration of a person's chosen identity.

I also took issue with our current conception of gender and the basis of it in biology. This theory reduces humanity to biological conditions that, as I proposed, are actually impositions of limits we want to see in biology that reflect our cultural views of gender. To state again, it is a *gendered biology* that we use to justify our stance of the mimetic relationship of gender to sex. Society reifies this view through the maintenance of already established social norms as well as covering up of the true origins of gender. By appealing to nature as a source of evidence for our current conception of gender, people become only as capable as nature allows, and so we inevitably begin to judge others by how well they mesh with nature. Sexism becomes common practice due to the acceptance of biological determinism. It creates stratified treatment of different sexes and genders in order to maintain *gendered biology*.

In this final chapter, I aim to develop my conception of gender using ideas from Mark Okrent's *Rational Animals*. In this book, Okrent outlines the development of social concepts through a principle-based system he calls "practical rationality." According to Okrent, this type of rationality involves an appeal not simply to a rule, but to the concept of a rule. The rule is one not decreed by nature, but is a chosen rule to be followed by the agent herself. I will acknowledge the importance of rule-following to make sense of concept formation as being central to our specific *type* as humans.

In addition, I will explain that gender operates as such a concept. The behaviors one exhibits are a reflection of group membership as well as an embodiment of the appropriate intentions for that behavior. In this way, one not only can recognize the person as part of a certain group, but can make sense of the actions the person commits. Essentially, this makes the

person *intelligible*, and since the actions of the person are assumed to be for reasons characteristic of people in that group, this also makes the person *predictable*. I wish to show why we have evolved to seek intelligible and predictable behavior for the sake of group stability.

It will be made clear that, although social concepts become normative through intelligibility and predictability, this does not mean that there is a necessary reason for them to develop in this specific way. These concepts are essentially *hollow* and only continue to exist because of popular consensus of their meaning. I will make the argument that gender is merely a concept under which arbitrary characteristics are assigned to different groups. The only reason characteristics of masculine and feminine are labeled in gendered terms is because of popular acceptance. I want to show that the capacity to change the appointing of traits is just as available as it always has been. Using autonomy as a vehicle for self-reflection of values—values that aid in determining the intentions of behavior—people are able to question the accepted tradition of gender. Freeing up traits from their loaded connotations, a person can then cultivate an identity that reflects her individuality by way of *human* traits appropriate for everyone to exhibit. Inspiring a rethinking of values and group membership via autonomy is my ultimate goal.

4.2 The Development of Practical Rationality

I will first outline an explanation of our evolutionary history to understand how practical rationality formed to be a primary guiding faculty for human beings. Stripping away the human to her organic self, we see that, as a biological being, she is fundamentally guided by biological ends of survival. This entails satisfying basic desires such as hunger, thirst, and sex. Each of these desires allows for a continuation of the species, and this is why we are hard-wired to enjoy performing them—the more we like the activity, the more we do it, and the greater chance of our

survival. Many lower animals have these drives as the main constitution of their existence. For example, the frog is driven to aim its tongue at floating black dots (whether it be a fly or lead pellet of similar characteristics) that streak across its visual field.⁷¹ These black dots are generally flies, and as the flies are a source of food for the frog, it is biologically cued to recognize and react to this stimulus. The frog presumably does not have the mental power to overcome these innate biological desires, and for good reason, since the frog, if it could decide otherwise than its biological ends, might begin to act for other superfluous reasons that stunt the chances of the frog reproducing. This, of course, would be problematic for the cycle of nature, and a large part of the animal kingdom could be negatively affected by such activity.

The frog is an example of a goal-directed creature that strives to fulfill its basic biological drives to satisfy and bring about its biological ends. Remnants of these drives are still a part of the modern human since we, too, must satisfy them in order for us to survive as biological creatures. However, we are not only guided to act for these ends. Most monkey species as well as humans have evolved to embody instrumental reasons for acting. According to Okrent, the merely instrumentally rational agent, in contrast to the merely goal-directed organism, “has reasons of its own [to act], but those reasons always involve the agent’s desiring to bring about some determinate state of affairs.”⁷² We act according to our beliefs about the world and what we believe we are capable of within it. In a means-end fashion, we strive step-by-step to bring about a certain state of affairs that is conducive to what we wish to occur in the future. We set a goal, decipher what is required to attain that goal, and go through the motions.

⁷¹ Okrent, 170.

⁷² Ibid., 181.

In much of our current activities as humans, instrumental action is taken as normal behavior. Okrent illustrates an example of a mother acting for particular reasons to bring about a certain state of affairs—in this case, for her child to be healthy and prosper.⁷³ For a mother to fulfill such a characteristic way of behaving, she will have to be present to take care of her child and to assure that the child is able to be comforted and free from harm whenever possible. If, when a mother comforts her crying child, she does so because she believes comforting it will ensure a prosperous life for the child, then the mother is acting in an instrumentally rational way; she is keeping in mind the *ends* that she strives toward. She has a goal of a certain state of affairs for her child, and she is acting to increase the likelihood that that state of affairs is brought about. In this way, she increases her chances of actualizing the ends she seeks.

As stated in my second chapter, humans do not have a *type* as other creatures do. Because we lack a type, we are “not determined by any natural fact about [ourselves].”⁷⁴ Indeed, we are unique in that we must be humans regardless of the fact that we belong to no natural type. The biological impulses we have do not directly determine what we desire, as might be the case with the frog. What we do have as guidance for our behavior are the values we subscribe to. And these values only gain meaning by way of our reflective nature.

Okrent believes that what separates us from other animals is our innate ability of *reflection*.⁷⁵ As humans, we are able to meta-cognate about our beliefs and values, to not only *think* them, but to think *about* them. From here, we can set up a distance between us and our beliefs and values, allowing us to analyze and fathom if they truly are the right things to do or uphold. This distancing is how we reflect on ourselves and our thoughts.

⁷³ Ibid., 182.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 180.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 177.

With this ability, we can determine ideal states of affairs, of course, but we can also create an identity for ourselves that we *choose*. Reflection exposes the values that are behind our everyday behavior. Values are the motivating features of ourselves that make certain actions, situations, and people meaningful. Gaining access to our values empowers us to revise, critique, and endorse them, giving further control over our own identity. Understanding the values we have and our ability to manipulate them is key to making a good life for oneself.

As our cultures become exceedingly complex and varied, we begin to form ourselves into specified groups with certain characteristics that distinguish us from members of other groups. These selective groups might be as broad as gender, race, or ethnicity, but also as specific as New Orleanian, teacher, or sister. Because we are able to fashion an identity for ourselves through self-selected values, the groups to which we belong manifest as part of our self-conceptions.

An example illustrated by Kwame Anthony Appiah, in his book *The Ethics of Identity*, exhibits the political cry for cultural protection by the Québécois people.⁷⁶ The Québécois, who primarily live in Quebec, Canada, strive to have their culture maintained and passed on to younger generations. This is not for the preservation of the mere label “Québécois”: it is a longing for the social support and protection of their Québécois traditions by way of the political safety net that allows them to cultivate their identity. In this way, the practices that they claim as their own have particular meaning to those who perform them as well as the culture in which they are performed. They want their identity to be upheld, in part, because it is their identity; it is a claim of recognition in the world. Ultimately, the self-conceptions they have created for

⁷⁶ Kwame Anthony Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 133.

themselves they deem valuable and worth saving; so, they wish to protect not only their name, but what makes them *who they are*.

There is a glass ceiling beyond which instrumental rationality does not serve as a useful and acceptable process for dictating action. As highly adaptive, highly cognitive creatures who contain advanced linguistic and interpersonal skills, we are able to act not just for particular ends but from *principles*. As the Kantian notion of nature purports, all of nature is driven according to specific laws.⁷⁷ There are natural laws that guide how objects move about given gravity and physics.

But one thing that is not present in the rest of the living and non-living world is the *concept* of rule or principle.⁷⁸ Objects and animals follow the rules that govern that type of object or animal: they have no choice but to follow those rules since they are governed by them. However, since humans lack a type, there cannot be a rule that governs their type. Humans can only appeal to the concept of a rule to determine how it can be used to govern behavior. The *content* of a rule for humans is nonexistent, too. In this way, humans must fill in the content of a rule in order for it to operate as a rule.

Here we can briefly look back at reflection and realize how important it is to rule-following. With humans, a rule is only applicable when a person acknowledges the existence of the rule.⁷⁹ It is not merely the fact that a rule may exist, but that the person *believes* it does. Basically, a rule has no governance over a person unless she believes it has this status. The only way for a person to do this is to reflect on her values to recognize what rules she is subject to

⁷⁷ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Lewis White Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1959), 29.

⁷⁸ Okrent, 177.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 180.

given those values. She accepts the values—indeed, believes they are her values—and deciphers the rules that follow from them.

What is inherent to reflective agents and their rule-based reasoning is the presence of second-order desires.⁸⁰ These allow an agent to decide whether a want, in the context of the rest of the agent’s beliefs, wants, and desires, is something that should be pursued. By being able to distance ourselves from our values, we can decide if a value is a good thing to have. This process involves examining a particular value in light of other values. If this one value conflicts with all of the others a person has, she can either decide to scrap it for the sake of the rest or keep it by either sacrificing the others or reconciling them with the value in question.

One way to recognize the impact of rules or principles and how they relate to values is through group membership. Since much of human interaction revolves around groups, we can see how someone’s identity can change depending on what group she belongs to. The way a person expresses her membership in a group is by acting as members of that group would act. The rules and principles that govern the performance of members of a group are what drive her to behave in the way that she does. She does not behave for the sake of a state of affairs per se, but rather to be an instance of a certain kind of person. What is at stake here is her identity. To revisit the case of the instrumentally rational mother, she would be acting in a practically rational way if she follows the logic of the principle “Mothers comfort their children” and “infers from [that] fact that she is the mother of this child [and] that she will comfort it.”⁸¹ She is attending to the child not for its prosperity or its health, but because, as a mother, this is what mothers are

⁸⁰ Ibid., 178.

⁸¹ Ibid., 182.

supposed to do. She will do it even when her desire to do so is not present because, regardless of what she feels like doing at the time, this is what mothers, as mothers, should do.

It is noteworthy to briefly discuss the origin of values in group membership and how this makes values important. My first two chapters discuss in depth how a person's autonomy is affected by the community in which she finds herself. Initially, an agent does not create her own values out of thin air, but rather *discovers* that she has them after they have been instilled in her by the groups of which she is a member. The rules and principles of these groups give her the values she currently has, and she acts as if she has these values. In this way, by acting on these values, she is acting as if she is a member of these groups. Since it appears she finds meaning in her group memberships, she behaves in ways that reflect these memberships. Her actions represent her values that, in turn, represent the groups from which these values originated. In simpler words, she wishes to appear to others as a member of these groups by acting according to the rules of the groups. Identity, no doubt, is comprised not merely of values in themselves, but of what and *who* those values correlate to. Group membership is crucial to the formation of values as well as their meaning.

Group membership is important not only to the individual, but also to society. As a person's values originate in groups, she generally will want to define herself as a member of them. In other words, her actions represent the actions of those in that group. This provides the predictability we humans desire to understand other people's behavior and the intentions behind their behavior. By setting up group identities, we can make sense of the reasons people act and in what situations certain acts are carried out. Thus, women are seen as acting for particular reasons based on the principles by which we commonly assume women act. We attribute a group identity to a woman because of the actions she performs as well as the characteristics we assume she

contains. In this way, a label stands for a number of different motivations and behaviors that are expected of those operating under that label. The labeling process makes others intelligible because it situates them within a framework of already understood terms. Encountering someone outside of preconceived labels, as mentioned in the last chapter, interrupts the flow of social order and makes salient what is generally tacitly understood.

There are good evolutionary reasons for wanting to label someone. Making a distinction between a friend and an enemy is a basic way of interpreting the world so we can assure our survival. We do not want to investigate every possible creature to see if it is a danger or not. From a distance, it makes more sense to recognize the appearance and normal behavior of something that typically will eat us or, likewise, something we typically will eat. No doubt hunters have used this basic process to find prey. Characteristic animal tracks or sounds allow a hunter to know what something is and where it is going. Applying instrumental reasoning, we can see that, in order to bring about the state of affairs of us being alive, we have good reason to recognize these particular traits.

We cannot remain advanced creatures without adhering to advanced abilities such as practical rationality, though. If we were to analyze this idea from an evolutionary perspective, it can be fathomed that humans *should* want to act according to rules to maintain stability among such a large population. If our livelihood is based on conceptual schemes of identity—as *being* a certain person takes certain qualifications and characteristics that fulfill that social concept—then we *should* want to uphold whatever allows these schemes to flourish. We have good instrumental reasons to be practically rational.⁸²

⁸² Ibid., 189.

4.3 Gender as a Social Concept

Social concepts, as it were, are top-down models of behavior. By this I mean we start with the label and work our way down to define all the characteristics of such. As we have mentioned, humans are alienated from any particular biological impulse that could type them. We are the only reflective beings who are capable of fashioning any sort of life we wish to embody. We collectively decide what certain groups of people characteristically do, and this is used to define identities. Gender has been understood incorrectly to be a ground-up distinction: we start from what we think is naturally expressed through males and females and we apply that to the genders of men and women. However, this presupposition, as has been shown in the previous chapter, is wrong and is an application of a *gendered biology*.

We can see now that gender operates as a social concept. A person is grouped into a category based on the behaviors she performs. The intentions behind those behaviors are assumed and seen as expressing the values of the person. These values are considered constitutive of the person's identity. Thus, we make sense of who a person is by way of how she displays herself—not only this, but by how well she fits into a category we already recognize and can make sense of. Classifying males and females as containing particular traits differentiates each type of person. We find that when we break human traits into two dominant categories—masculine and feminine—we can expect a person to behave in a certain way dependent on the group we ascribe to them. This is because of the social pressure for a person to conform to these group-supported identities. If one were to act differently than what is mandated by our conception of the group, it sticks out to us as being abnormal, and we do not know exactly how to make sense of it. Of course, we try to confine them to the labels we are familiar with—this is

not only so we can understand who a person is, but also to predict future action. We want someone's identity to be intelligible to us as well as fit into the social order already in place. This makes for a smooth, cohesive social system.

Practically rational behavior makes our lives more meaningful and predictable, and it gives us the ability to define ourselves in ways that are not restricted by nature. Through this process, we have created the groups of man and woman as well as the traits we collectively believe to be representative of each group. However, since this process is not something that appeals to some fact in nature about humans—since we have no type—a redefinition of these groups is just as possible and reasonable as it was when they were first created. Masculine and feminine traits only hold to their respective genders because much of society accepts this. But a person is free to manipulate these groups at any time. This is not to say she will do this without resistance by others, but that she is capable of using the exact same methods used to instantiate these identities to reorganize them.

The pressures put on people to conform to the established group identities in society are immense. We have social methods like scorn and guilt for dealing with those who fall “out of line.” Unfortunately, violence, too, is sometimes used to restrict group identity redefinition. Reaction to a person who does not fit into pre-conceived identities can be sporadic and highly varied: some people will tolerate others and try to learn about them; some people will try to make sense of them by way of the identity resources they already have; and others will yell at and demean them because of a failure to fit into society's conceptions of group identities. These reactions can come from strangers, friends, family, and even legislators in the government who enact laws to forbid reconfiguration of certain identities. Although people are free to change their

identities and manipulate the properties of them, they may be unable to exercise this change in the greater community outside of close friends and family members.

It is becoming clear that, ironically, practical rationality is what allowed the traditional concepts of gender to flourish. I want to stress that social concepts are *hollow* and without any permanent content. Since there is no necessary way to define a social concept, it is entirely reasonable that gender has been defined according to a *gendered biology*. Although this is an incorrect way to define gender, it can be understood why it formed this way. Social concepts lack concreteness of content, so anything that could make sense as being the evidence for a certain conception of gender is fair game. Considering the probable lack of intellectual and scientific knowledge at the time of the biological determinist definition of gender, it made sense to point to the most matter-of-fact limit of people's lives: nature.

What I have attempted to show so far is not necessarily a new definition of gender, but rather an exposition of it in its form as a social concept. We can see how quickly social concepts can spread and how powerful they are over people's lives. Since much of the identities people embody originate in and are regulated by their social existence, the concepts they manifest have a profound effect on how they carry out their lives. When we consider the relational aspect of society, we can see why these identities are upheld so well. If we are born into environments that already have set identities and ways of living, it is incredibly difficult to make sense of oneself without appealing to one of these forms of life. To fit into any social group, it is imperative that a person share something in common with everyone else; this not only gives meaning to one's life by way of being recognizable, but it fuels the feeling of solidarity that holds a society together. Clearly, solidarity exists in smaller groups, too, since the characteristics of these individual groups are all agreed upon within the group as well as within the larger culture.

Understanding that human traits have been given arbitrary gender distinctions, we can see that the terminology of masculine and feminine ceases to be suited for firmly separating people. These originated out of the traditional conceptions of gender, and since we have witnessed the underpinnings of that tradition as well as how it was formed, the meaning it once had is lost. Now, these traits can define anyone and represent any identity.

4.4 Changes to Sexism

What does this mean for sexism? I believe that sexism originated in the limiting and confining ideas of gender that we have already debunked. Now that biology is shown to not be determinate of social behavior, there are no traits that are essential to either gender (or sex for that matter) in virtue of a person being that particular gender. This means that the social world is no longer reducible to biology. No traits are permanently tied to a person because of their gender, and so the barriers of this social concept that were once used to permanently stratify people are now transparent and permeable. Sexism begins to fall apart because it no longer can point to the evidence in nature it has relied on for justification for so long. To maintain a sexist view now is to appeal to a false theory—it is self-deception.

Tying in this explication of gender with my conception of autonomy, we can see methods for empowering people to change how they define themselves. The Four C's that I put forth in my second chapter—Consider one's type, Consider one's values and commitments, Consider the source, and Consider one's tacit peripheral group memberships—allow a person to not only make note of the content of her values but also the source of them and why they are meaningful. The Four C's allow a person to understand that she has the power to reconfigure different aspects of her identity so that they reflect who she wants to be. However, we still must acknowledge that,

as our intersectional identity goes, there are social forces that we are not in positions to entirely control. Gender, unfortunately, is one of them. This does not preclude the ability to manipulate them, however. Starting from an individual perspective, a person can internally adjust her identity once she has reflected on and endorsed her values, especially in light of the definition and structure of social concepts. She can present these values to the world in her behavior and group memberships. By practical rationality, she derives her actions from the groups she wants to be a part of, and so she does what members of those groups characteristically do. If she has made sure not to take group membership for granted and she has fully reflected on her values, she can be said to have autonomously decided who she is and how she wishes to represent herself.

Moving from a small-scale level of redefinition, we can see that, as people begin to change their own conceptions of identities, what the greater population accepts also begins to change. Since society is comprised of individuals, each person has a small effect on the greater whole. When a large portion of that whole is altered, society's views of what is acceptable go along with it. The more people that question the established order of gender, the more open and accessible gender begins to be. It loses its footing in some natural order, and this allows it to be exposed as a mere *product* of society instead of a social representation of something more. Deliberation over what qualifies as a trait of a certain gender would surely begin to spread. By the process of self-reflection on values, identities would begin to change and be coordinated with what a person *wants* to be instead of how she merely *happens* to be based on how society conceives of her. We finally gain back some individual control over the mechanism of social concepts.

It must be stated that, although one may not fit into a discrete group outlined already by society, it makes sense to appeal to one. This makes life easier by having all the identities already known of people one many encounter. One will be able to interpret every performance by another as a reflection of a certain identity, and so there is no mystery and no figuring out of anyone else. Still, it is naïve to think that all the labels present in society today are permanent and fixed, that they are to always be respected and adhered to. However, it is obvious why life is simpler when a person retains her ignorance of the actual condition of her identity. Clearly, though, this sort of self-deception would violate autonomy.

4.5 Conclusion

My hope with this chapter has been to illustrate the flexibility of social concepts. The firm definitions of gender begin to degrade once we expose how they are bolstered. No foundation for these classifications can be found in nature. We cannot think of a natural order by which to judge our behavior. The power of society rests on the power of each individual to accept or deny what the group believes is true. If we use my conception of autonomy along with the proper understanding of gender, we can actualize what our values really are without entirely limiting ourselves to preconceived notions of what we can become. The traits we wish to exhibit will be open for acceptance without as much pressure to conform or manipulate them to fit the model of what masculine or feminine mean.

At the very least, I wish for people to be able to question their own values to the fullest extent and not automatically assume that, because something has been a part of a society for so long, it must be right. Understanding oneself as a reflective agent empowers a person to not take any of her characteristics for granted. Identity is defined both by the social order and the self, the

former being able to be manipulated by the latter. The power of each person was removed from her hands and placed into a collective understanding. People molded themselves along with the group and accepted values without fully examining them. However, this does not have to be so.

Since I have questioned tradition for almost the entirety of this thesis, I wish to break the tradition of autonomy as an esoteric term. It remains enigmatic to most people partly due to the obscure ways in which it is sometimes conceived; it has also resisted household use because of the many forms it seems to take. There is no way that this thesis even scratches the surface of the philosophical topic of autonomy, as so many conditions are involved with its actualization. Liberty and freedom are more easily digested by the general population—however, I believe these terms are only derivative of autonomy. We must, at the very least, inspire a rethinking of identity through reflection and self-understanding so that the person one becomes is truly the person one *wants* to be.

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VITA

Scott Szymanski is originally from the state of Georgia, where he was born and raised. In 2005, he graduated from Peachtree Ridge High School and began his studies at Georgia Southern University with a major in business. In his second year, he changed his major to international studies, but realized his potential once he took a class in philosophy. Soon after, he changed his major to philosophy. He became the treasurer of the Georgia Southern University chapter of the Phi Sigma Tau Philosophical Honor Society as well as an active member in the Omega Phi Alpha Service Sorority and the Delta Epsilon Iota Honor Society. In the spring of 2009, he presented a paper at the Southeastern Philosophy Congress at Clayton State University. He graduated cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Georgia Southern University in 2009. He was accepted to Louisiana State University the same year and began his graduate studies as a Master of Arts student in philosophy. Inspired by an independent study with Dr. James Rocha, he became intrigued by the problems of autonomy and gender. He began writing his thesis on the same topic in the spring of 2011. He successfully defended his thesis on April 11, 2011. He is expected to graduate with a 4.0 grade point average in May 2011.