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Surveillance, Autonomy, and Control: Analysis of *The Handmaid's Tale*

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* describes a dystopia where a theocratic government, Gilead, progressively dismantles women's autonomy in the guise of social salvation. Under threat of environmental degradation and sterility, the state takes totalitarian control over reproduction, reducing women to mere instruments of state policy. The novel, as seen through Offred's reflections, is a sobering account of systematic repression in the disguise of moral duty.

It is a warning of what can become a reality for our world in the near future. Throughout the globe, instances from the novel have already come to life. From countries in the middle east that imposed restrictive rights for women's bodies and their education to surveillance states that offer its citizens a reduction in privacy and the inability to freely express themselves without punishment.

This essay examines the societal issues from *The Handmaid's Tale* breaking it down within three theoretical frameworks: utilitarianism, deontology, and feminist ethics. Drawing on the lived experience of Offred and informed by philosophical values, this argument posits that Gilead's moral language is a thin veneer over profound breaches of consent, justice, and autonomy, echoing contemporary issues in technology, governance, and bodily rights.

Utilitarianism, as described by Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill, holds judgments of actions to their consequences, for whether they produce the most happiness for the most people. Gilead distorts this moral thinking in arguing the subjugation of reproductive women for the human species' survival. The regime identifies the fertility crisis as deserving of sacrifice, portraying the coerced Handmaid positions as necessary for the public good.

But this defence fails under scrutiny. Mill, in his discussion of higher and lower pleasures, emphasises that dignity, emotional well-being, and mental health are higher kinds of happiness than lowbrow physical life. Offred, whose own body is utilised as a state-controlled reproductive machine, suffers trauma that no ethically grounded utilitarian argument could justify. The Ceremony, where she is raped in a ritualized act of state violence, is a case in point. Her memories of having her daughter taken away from her and her identity erased are reminders that Gilead's notion of happiness isn't collective or real; it is coercive and hierarchical.

Moreover, Gilead does not even achieve the happiness it claims to desire. Even among the ruling elites, there is public discontent. Serena Joy is bitter, resentful, and held in servitude by the same policies she once advocated. Commanders are hypocrites, indulging in outlawed vices yet upholding stern public morality. No general flourishing, but just subsequence, hierarchy, and domination.

Such utilitarian rhetoric abuse is a reproduction of previous abuse, such as 20th-century eugenics laws that sterilised poor women in the name of "public good." Utilitarian thought in those cases was employed to sanction grossly unjust, discriminatory actions. Gilead's similar programs promised to maximise shared good by ignoring or exploiting the suffering of oppressed peoples. These examples warn us that utilitarianism, without the shields of justice and rights, can be weaponized.

Deontology, particularly its Immanuel Kantian version, emphasizes rational duty-based moral rules and respect for persons as ends and not means. Deontology holds that human beings can never be used as mere means to an end. Gilead profanes this principle by reducing Handmaids into reproductive tools, refusing to give them names, choices, and selfhood.

Offred's own identity is erased when she is renamed "Of-Fred," signifying property of her assigned Commander. Her inner speech, "I keep the knowledge of my name like something hidden, some treasure I'll come back to", constitutes a resistance to this dehumanization. Kantian ethics combines moral agency with autonomy and rational capacity. Gilead erases this agency, substituting scripted obedience for moral deliberation.

Even the regime's attempts at displays of "kindness" are short of Kant's ethical scrutiny. Commander Waterford takes Offred to a clandestine brothel and plays Scrabble with her alone. He states that he "cares" for her, but his concern is shallow and rooted in control. He does not see Offred as a human being to be treated with respect, but as an entertainment, an exception, a deviation from the norm that he enforces. Deontology would reject such behavior as morally bankrupt, these things are not done out of duty or respect, but convenience and power.

Contemporary analogues are found in data-driven governance and policing. Predictive policing software and automated border control equipment reduce humans into statistical possibilities. Automated and unnoticed, these systems operate on autopilot, transforming individuals into data points to be responded to rather than human beings to be consulted. When computers decide who will receive medical treatment, housing, or bail without being held accountable, we are reenacting Gilead's moral error: denying individuals their status as moral subjects.

Kant's ethical framework teaches us that moral cultures must accord every human being respect irrespective of consequences or utility. Governments that maximize efficiency or order at the expense of respect for human agency can end up building a modern form of Gilead under a cloak of technocracy.

Feminist ethics criticizes dominant moral theories for excluding emotion, context, and relationship. It encourages lived experience, relational autonomy, and the ethical value of care. Gilead attempts to sever these relationships, separating children from mothers, turning friends into potential informants, and institutionalising distrust. Handmaids are isolated from one another, taught to be distrustful, but Offred's survival is based on the same relations the regime is attempting to annihilate.

She becomes involved with Ofglen, who is initially suspicious but then becomes an ally through risk and trust. Her whispered conversations with Ofglen constitute rebellion. Offred's memory of her mother, a radical feminist, is a further reservoir of strength, a ghost from the past that insists on her identity. Even simply using butter as a lotion or hiding contraband goods is a tacit exercise of bodily autonomy in a culture that deprives her of that.

Feminist ethics argues that care is not a question of personal sentiment; it's a political act. The Marthas' complicity by silence, the Handmaids' looks, and the writing of notes are all ways of staying in moral personhood under conditions of oppression. Where Gilead seeks to exclude, care builds community.

In our time, feminist ethics urges us to criticize those technologies and institutions that appear to be neutral but are harmful. So-called reproductive health applications, which are often framed as empowerment tools, can collect and share information with employers or governments. Convenience can masquerade as coercion. If these technologies lack ethical governance, they can apply the same reasoning that Gilead does, turning bodies into monitored systems.

Feminist ethics challenges us to design institutions based on empathy, inclusiveness, and an understanding of unequal power. This offers a model for combating dehumanization embedded in systems, not merely in fiction, but in the algorithms, apps, and workplaces we build.

Gilead's surveillance state operates through fear and visibility. In the novel, "The Eyes" is their secret police, in charge of maintaining the regime's control over its citizens through surveillance. They don't only function as Gilead's enforcers, but their presence acts as psychological deterrents. Indirectly leading citizens to police themselves in fear, because they don't know if they're being listened to or watched. This ambient paranoia isn't limited to fiction. A real-life example of this can be seen in Edward Snowden's case.

In 2013, Edward Snowden, a former NSA contractor/ex-CIA, blew the whistle on the scale of US surveillance on its citizens. He exposed several secret government surveillance programs, including PRISM and XKeyscore. PRISM was a data-collection program with which the US government had direct collaboration with major tech companies like Microsoft and Yahoo, providing the US government with user data, bypassing the legal process of properly requesting information. XKeyscore, described to be "a search engine for the NSA" capable of processing petabytes of data. It was used to allow the NSA to search and monitor live communications such as emails and text messages, through searching for keywords in collected user data from other surveillance programs. This sparked outrage globally, prompting debates about the ethical price of mass surveillance. The cost of sacrificing privacy for security.

This reality draws a parallel with Gilead's basic method of control. Both regimes refuse to give citizens privacy, with their actions being watched for deviation from standards set by the rulers. There's also consumer tech like Siri, Alexa, and Google Assistant that are propagators of modern surveillance culture. These devices record voice data, location history, and behavioral patterns, sometimes with less than full informed user consent. In a recent lawsuit, *Lopez v. Apple Inc.*, was filed against Apple for misuse of Siri, which "inadvertently" recorded

unconsented private conversations and shared them with third-party contractors. The tech giant settled to avoid further litigation and paid \$95 million, a mere slap on the wrist despite the scale of the privacy concern. While they are valuable technological tools in our daily lives, they unfortunately create the digital infrastructure of passive surveillance. Even promises for the protection of our privacy from these tech companies cannot be fully trusted.

From Kant's perspective, he would disagree with mass surveillance and data collection used on U.S. citizens, as it violates the treatment of individuals as ends in themselves instead of means. Using citizens as mere data points to find efficient ways to control them or increase profits violates principles of human dignity.

We see a collision between Gilead and our modern world, as digital technology has advanced and the ability to surveil citizens has become much easier and

A rising concern is Palantir Technologies, a data integration and analytics tech company with longstanding ties to the US government. Its software is widely used amongst police departments and federal agencies to integrate data from diverse sources, enabling the tracking, monitoring, and prediction of individual behaviors. Recently, they have won a \$30 million contract to deliver a software-as-a-service platform named "ImmigrationOS" to assist the U.S. Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agency in tracking and managing deportations of immigrants. This situation is almost identical to the 2013 Snowden case, but now with the U.S. government publicly outsourcing mass surveillance and data integration to a private tech company. Although efforts are made to specifically target illegal immigrants in the U.S., it bears the risk of misuse upon its citizens. Additionally, with the recent executive order, "*Stopping Waste, Fraud, and Abuse by Eliminating Information Silos*" eliminates the barriers of accessing data between federal agencies in an attempt to centralize all data information in a single database, raising extreme concerns for privacy risks, confidentiality, and the abuse of power.

From a utilitarian perspective, they would heavily disagree with the U.S. government's partnership with Palantir to develop a technology for mass surveillance in tracking and monitoring of individuals. Despite the intended purpose of this technology (to protect American citizens or government efficiency), the utility is completely outweighed by the risk and implications of its misuse and privacy violation among U.S. citizens. Ultimately, it also inflicts harm and fear on immigrants, threatening to be torn away from their families and communities, which goes against the belief in maximizing overall well-being.

Similarly, Gilead's use of menstrual tracking and medical records also categorizes women based on perceived usefulness to the state. Personhood becomes conditional when data is used as a weapon.

What is dangerous here is not so much the surveillance, but its normalization. As your presentation clarified, the ethical principle "mass surveillance is justified to guarantee stability" fails both the Kantian test and any test of human dignity. It treats citizens as instruments, not agents.

Furthermore, surveillance capitalism describes how tech companies translate human experience into behavioral data to profit. This commodification of identity is uncomfortably close to Gilead's reduction of women to birthing resources. Both systems prioritise extractive usefulness over human thriving.

Ethical reflection compels us to ask: Whom does our data belong to? Who is served by our actions? Who is harmed by our silence? Gilead is not built overnight. It is built piece by piece through indifference, through "neutral" technologies, through moral compromise dressed up as innovation.

Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* serves as a cautionary tale about authoritarian control using technology over human autonomy and privacy. Through the lens of ethical frameworks: utilitarianism, deontology, and feminist ethics, we see how Gilead's rhetoric of collective good shadows societal issues of individual consent, dignity, and autonomy. The regime's oppressive ruling echoes contemporary challenges in technology and governance, where mass surveillance, data commodification, and state overreach threaten human dignity.

Today, the development of technology has allowed governments and tech companies to gain further access to our daily lives. As everyday we are a step closer to fully losing our privacy. The lessons from the novel warn us to become vigilant and hold empathy in protecting human autonomy and justice in the face of technological power. By uniting as one, we can prevent a future Gilead from being created by developing stronger policies around privacy, dignity, and freedom for all.

Sources

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