

# POWER, ENERGY, AND THE SOCIETY OF INDIVIDUALITY IN J. S. MILL'S ON LIBERTY

*SUBTÍTULO*

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I begin, haltingly, and the individual begins, for John Stuart Mill, with an impulse.<sup>2</sup> My impulse, in terms of Mill, is to ask after power and energy in his *On Liberty*. There, impulses are desires and those of the “Strong” variety are synonymous with energy (Mill 2002, p. 62). An individual with their own impulses has character and one with strong impulses governed by a strong will has energetic character. One without them has no character.<sup>3</sup> I begin haltingly, in part, because, insofar as my impulse is directed toward power and energy, I am unsure as to the will that may or may not govern it, whether this question reveals or begins to reveal something of my character, its degree of energy, or the lack thereof. What does it mean, in other words, to ask about power and energy in this book? Call this question the opening of an experiment in thinking.

In partial answer to this question, and also to further explain my halting beginning, it does not seem much taken up in places where one might expect it to appear. A few important examples: John Rawls's interest in Mill, in *Political Liberalism*, is primarily limited to the latter's system as a comprehensive doctrine, making it not properly political on the former's understanding.<sup>4</sup> In *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls seems to focus more on utilitarianism's stringency, on the force of reasons in determining the intellect and the importance of education in cultivating the impact of this, and on the importance of both free institutions and avoiding the tyranny of the majority than it does on this question of power.<sup>5</sup> Robert Nozick, in *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, mentions Mill once, and not in any significant fashion.<sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault does not mention him at all in either *The Order of Things* or *Discipline and Punish*, where so much is made of Bentham's utilitarianism.<sup>7</sup>

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2 I should also begin with a note of thanks, first foremost to Camilla Barbosa, Izadora Barborosa, and Heitor Pagliaro for the kind invitation to participate in the Colóquio Internacional Miroslav Milović and the warm reception during it. I am also grateful to the audience at the Colóquio for their penetrating questions. In addition, I should thank my students in the course I taught in September, 2022, at the Institut d'Études Politiques de Rennes as well as those over several years at the Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts, where I started to articulate this reading of Mill.

3 See Mill 2002, p. 65.

4 See Rawls 1996, pp. 78, 98, 145, 159, 199-200, 211n42, 303, 375n3, and 400.

5 See Rawls 1999, pp. 23, 108, 184-195, 204-206, 403, and 476.

6 See Nozick 1974, p. 183.

7 See Foucault 1994 and 1995. Perhaps, though I am unsure I believe this, the claim in *On Liberty* to a utilitarianism “in the largest sense” leads Foucault away from him (Mill 2002, p. 13).



Such silence strikes me as odd, if only because the book's focus on "Civil, or Social Liberty" means that it is concerned with "the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (Mill 2002, p. 16). To be sure, Mill is clearly interested in the issue of sociopolitical power at the national level. Such is the dominant mode of using the word in, for instance, Michael Levin's *J. S. Mill on Civilization and Barbarism*, though he also uses it in reference to international political and to economic power.<sup>8</sup> Yet, insofar as impulses and desires are, at least when strong, synonymous with energy and insofar as individuality is the driving force or impulse of the sociopolitical program Mill presents in *On Liberty*, ought power not be taken up more broadly than sociopolitical power alone, in particular in its relationship to energy? Levin, though, never links the question of power to the question of energy, never links the question of the sociopolitical to individuality. The closest to such a link is that mass society has depleted individual energy and that sustaining early human civilization took up much energy.<sup>9</sup> Both claims are true about Mill, but there remains a rather consistent assumption of understanding what power and energy are in *On Liberty*.

One difficulty here is that, for all its importance, Mill never defines 'power' in *On Liberty*. Now, the only substantial investigation of power in Mill's work in general, at least of which I am aware, is Bruce Baum's *Rereading Power and Freedom in J. S. Mill*, which builds much of its argument by contrasting the negative concept of freedom "that has been dominant in the Anglo-American tradition," exemplified above in Rawls and Nozick, with Mill's concept of it, in which "Considerations power lie at [its] heart." He defines Millian power as "a capacity to affect change or to achieve desired goals."<sup>10</sup> However, Baum does not much discuss the role of energy, especially in connection with *On Liberty*. He cites the argument in *The Subjection of Women* that household duties sap women's mental energies, the defense of *laissez-faire* economics in *The Principles of Political Economy* on the ground that active exertion of energy is crucial to mental improvement, and the claim that the responsibilities and activities of most people in modern society leave little energy for political concerns in *Considerations on Representative Government*.<sup>11</sup> Yet the relationship between power and energy in *On Liberty* remains uninvestigated. Baum does take up the question of Millian character, which he understands as "a necessary precondition of the freedom to pursue one's own mode of life" and argues that it relies on Mill's specific, quasi-atheistic Anglo-Protestant experience (Baum 2000, pp. 25, 56, 72, and 29).<sup>12</sup> Nonetheless, he does not draw a clear connection between his definition of Millian power and Mill's understanding of energy.

All of which, all of this halting and hesitation, indicates what seems to be a gap as concerns what is going on in *On Liberty*, a gap to which I cannot do full justice here. I will, nonetheless, track things out from the moment late in chapter 4, where Mill displays sangfroid at the prospect of the collapse of civilization in the face of "energetic barbarians." Still, I also cannot do justice to the full import of even this moment in that it has, I take it, a dual reference: one to the Visigoths in the late Western Roman Empire and the other to the Mormon community in the Utah territory. Mill says that the British press at the time was calling for a "*civilizade*"

8 See Levin 2004, pp. 2, 4, 13, 15-19, 21-24, 35, 51-52, 66, 73, 82, 87-91, 100, 104-105, 107, 129, 131, and 133.

9 See Levin 2004, pp. 22 and 64.

10 On how negative liberty became important for this tradition, see Podoksik and Elazar 2021.

11 See Baum 2000, pp. 174-175, 210, and 265.

12 See also Baum 2000, pp. 38-39 and 268.

against the latter (Mill 2002, pp. 95 and 96). This second reference is beyond my scope and I will instead begin the inquiry from the Visigoths.

## **SOCIETIES OF CUSTOM AND THE LACK OF CHARACTER**

That closing line to chapter 4, where Mill writes that those energetic barbarians “destroyed and regenerated” the Western Empire, itself has a dual reference on my understanding. One is to the Visigoths and the other to Constantine the Great, or at least to Christianity. Let me first take up the Visigoths, which itself demands a discussion of Mill’s take on nineteenth-century China.

### *STAGNANT SOCIETIES AND PURELY FORMAL WILLS*

Having spent about a century raiding various parts of the Eastern Empire, in 376 the Visigoth king Fritigern appealed to Emperor Valens to settle south of the Danube in order to find refuge from the Huns, to which Valens agreed so as to gain recruits for the Roman army. After a famine broke out and the Empire proved unwilling to supply the Visigoths with food or land, they revolted and plundered the Balkan peninsula, leading to their victory at Battle of Adrianople in 378, where Valens and many elite Roman soldiers were killed. As a result, Rome negotiated with the Visigoths to settle them within its borders, though hostilities continued until 382. That year, they became a federated people within the Empire, receiving semi-autonomous control over land in exchange for providing soldiers to the Roman army. After the death of Emperor Theodosius I in 395, the Visigoth king Alaric I made a bid for the imperial throne, failed, and became military commander of Illyria. After Roman legionaries killed thousands of barbarian soldiers trying to integrate within the Empire, Alaric marched on Rome, sacking it in 410.<sup>13</sup> These are the barbarians who reinvigorated, who returned energy, life, impulses, and so power to the Western Roman Empire, which had, on Mill’s reading, “become so degenerate” and stagnant that it no longer had the resources to properly maintain itself from external or internal mental or physical difficulties (Mill 2002, p. 96).<sup>14</sup>

In explaining degeneracy and stagnation, he turns to the China of his time, though he regards his claims as applicable to “the whole East,” where custom was “the final appeal.”<sup>15</sup> When *On Liberty* was published in 1859, Qing-dynasty China’s final defeat in the Second Opium War, or Second Anglo-Sino War, was a year away. It was twenty years into what is referred to as its Century of Humiliation (*Bǎinián Guóchǐ*) at the hands of Western powers.<sup>16</sup> For Mill, the Humiliation was far from the result of inherent inferiority on the part of the Chinese people or nation, but rather from the fact that its organization around custom had let it become “stationary” or no longer progressing. This organization made its people “all alike” and did not let individuality “successfully to assert itself.” Insofar as nineteenth-century China had become,

13 See Burns 2003, pp. 322 and 374; Durant 1950, pp. 24-25; Frassetto 2003, pp. 204-205; Fuller 1998, p. 55; Halsall 2007, pp. 179-180 and 214-217; Heather 2013, pp. 153-160; Sarris 2002, p. 36; and Waldman and Mason 2006, pp. 844-845.

14 I equate degeneracy and stagnation because of what Mill says about life without exemplars of human originality, to which I will return below. For now, it will help to explain that, in fluid dynamics, stagnation is the point where velocity in a flow field reaches zero. That is, it is the point where there is no longer movement in an area of fluids (see Clancy 1975, p. 17).

15 It should not be forgotten that Mill was an administrator for the East India Company for thirty-five years, up to 1858, the year before the publication of *On Liberty*. For the importance of this experience on his philosophy, see van Waarden 2015.

16 See Adcock Kaufman 2010.

like the fourth- and fifth-century Western Roman Empire, degenerate and stagnant and if their sign was in the inability to resist energetic barbarians, it seems that the barbarians for China were the British. Regardless whether they reinvigorated China the way Mill claims happened with Rome, the stagnation itself indicates for him that such a civilization should be overcome: “It can only go from bad to worse,” from stagnant to fetid (Mill 2002, pp. 73, 74, and 96).

In that these barbarians, the Visigoths and British, had energetic character, they had strong impulses governed by strong wills. In that the late Western Empire and Qing-dynasty China were stagnant, they seem to have had no character; their impulses were not their own. They did not, precisely speaking, lack impulses, desires, or energy, but they did not take those impulses as their own. The impulses were directed by a pure or purely formal will that, insofar as pure or formal, had no power or at least no content. They did not result in “a capacity to affect change or to achieve desired goals.”

Such is why, despite the importance of a will in forming an energetic character, Mill is less interested in the liberty of the will than he is in civil or social liberty. Discourse on the will, especially as contrasted with necessity, is a purely formal concern. A will without energy, impulses, or desires to govern is pointless. One without its own strength is empty. The lack of character in contrast with having energetic character suggests that the civilizational collapses Mill mentions have as much to do with the pure formality of those civilizations’ wills as with anything else. They did not, of course, will to collapse, but their wills, in being pointless and empty, lacked impulses, desires, and energy either of their own or to govern. Neither did they, in lacking their own energy, lack energy as such. However, in being without content, their energy was of governance as such. In this way, the purely formal wills of degenerate and stagnant societies is, for Mill, wills of only force, governing nothing but still insisting on governmental power.

#### *BARBARIAN AND MODERN MORALITIES*

The other reference at the end of chapter 4 of *On Liberty* is, I take it, to Christianity. The degenerate Rome that the Visigoths destroyed and reinvigorated was Christianized, approximately seventy years after the Edict of Nantes allowed Christians to practice their faith without oppression.<sup>17</sup> It was a Rome in which civilization “got the better of barbarism when barbarism had the world to itself” (Mill 2002, p. 96).

Now, Christian morality for Mill “always refers to a preëxisting morality,” i.e., to the Greco-Roman morality that dominated the ancient Mediterranean and the Jewish morality of the Roman province of Judea. By and large, according to him the Gospels are both a reaction against and an accommodation to paganism. They are focused on passivity, obedience, and avoiding evil rather than on activity, nobility, and doing good (Mill 2002, p. 50).<sup>18</sup> Though he does not specify, Mill seems to believe that the sayings of Jesus that had a civilizing effect on the barbarian, pagan world are limited to the Sermon on the Mount: “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven,” and so on (Matthew 5:3).<sup>19</sup> Any specific Christian

17 See Bowder 1987, p. 28.

18 See also Mill 2002, pp. 50-51.

19 See also Mill 2002, p. 42.

morality beyond reaction and accommodation is for him the work of later theologians and he understands “modern morality” as a combination of the Gospels’ passivity, obedience, and avoidance of evil with the Greco-Roman “magnanimity, high-mindedness, personal dignity,” and sense of honor in public and private life (Mill 2002, p. 51).

What thus seems to have made pagan civilizations, whether Visigoth or Greco-Roman, barbarian was less their moralities, even less their energies, than it was their ancientness. Since their polities were “surrounded by powerful enemies,” they felt entitled to regulate the public and private conduct of their citizens and gave a superior role to civil or social duty. As a result, ancient rulers were “in a necessarily antagonistic position” to the ruled. Those rulers had impulses and desires strong enough to govern the wills of others, especially through the social virtues infiltrating the private spheres. Thus, the threat of the ancient form of tyranny was ever present and thus the ancient concept of liberty, “protection against...the political rulers,” developed. As modern, non-barbaric civilizations grew larger and were not under constant threat, neither this antagonism nor this protection seemed necessary and rulers came to be understood as identical to the nation, their wills identical to its (Mill 2002, pp. 15, 3, and 4).<sup>20</sup> The change and this combination of moralities led not only into the threat of the modern form of tyranny, that of the majority, but also to the modern forms of character, which are threatened with their own forms of stagnation and degeneracy.

### **MODERN CHARACTERS AND THE IMPULSE TO OBEY**

The tyranny of the majority, a term Mill takes from John Adams,<sup>21</sup> occurs because modernity — in its material changes whereby external threats were no longer so constant, with the result that the antagonism between ruler and ruled was determined to no longer be so necessary — failed to understand that ‘the will of the people’ means, in practice, “the will of the most numerous or the most active *part* of the people” (Mill 2002, p. 6). This failure led to, through what Mill calls the spirit of improvement, attempts to force non-majorities to improve themselves. In turn, these attempts caused an equal and opposite reaction by those non-majorities. What is more, improvement can itself become a custom, leading to a paradoxical form of stagnation.

### *THE SOCIETY OF THE SPIRIT OF IMPROVEMENT AND THE REACTIONARY CHARACTER*

Returning to the issue of barbarians and energy, if civilization got the better of barbarism, even after barbarism reinvigorated Christianized Roman civilization, <sup>22</sup>this would seem to

<sup>20</sup> See also Mill 2002, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> See Podoksik and Elazar 2021, p. 146. One important difference between Adams’s introduction of the term and Mill’s deployment of it is that the former does not take it as structurally parallel to but distinct from ancient tyranny in the materially historical sense in the way the latter does. Adams introduces “the tyranny of the majority” while defending the division of powers in the United States and finds that the only solution to it is “giving the [minority] a negative on the latter,” that is, to find “a balance” in political power as opposed to “unanimity” (Adams 1788, p. 291). Ancient Rome, Renaissance Italy, eighteenth-century Poland, and so on all erred in the same way, by investing all political power in a single governmental office (see Adams 1788, pp. 286-291).

<sup>22</sup> The first Visigoth king to convert to non-Arian Christianity was Reccared I, in 587 (see Biclario 1999, p. 74), over a century after Emperor Romulus Augustus was overthrown by the barbarian Roman soldier Odoacer, whose ethnic origins are unclear (see Krautshick 1986). Odoacer’s coup is the traditional end of the Western Empire and beginning of the medieval world (see Gibbon 1909, p. 1299n125).

be because of an energy in the Gospels' stress on obedience to transform pagan nobility. In other words, the pagan character seems to have become purely formal and could not resist the moral-political energy of Christian passivity, of the impulse to obey. This impulse, rather than individuality, marks the transition into modernity. Thus, Mill's "time...in the progress of human affairs, when men ceased to think it a necessity of nature that their governors should be an independent power," is a progress resulting from the impulse to obey coming to dominate other impulses such that the will governing it became strong enough to govern all other impulses (Mill 2002, pp. 4-5). The modern character is not, then, that lack of character or purely formal will found in both barbarian and Christian late Western Empire or in the Qing dynasty, but rather a will energetically governing a strong impulse to be governed.

Understanding the modern character in this way, and its internal relationship between the will and impulses, makes sense of Mill's distinction between the spirits of improvement and of liberty as well as of their respective antagonisms to custom. Both are signs of a "progressive principle" or "disposition to something better than customary." However, the spirit of improvement can force what it takes to be better on those unwilling to improve or be improved. This force can be with or without impulses, can have energetic or no character. Again, the liberty that concerns *On Liberty* is not the free will, which is particularly irrelevant if the modern character is marked by a will energetically governing a strong impulse to be governed. It is instead civil or social liberty, now described as "the only unfailing and permanent source of improvement." Yet, since the spirit of civil or social liberty is that of the legitimate limits of political power over individuals, this spirit may resist that of improvement. If the modern character can indeed be taken as an impulse to obey or be governed, this resistance can easily result in an alliance of the spirit of liberty with "the opponents of improvement" (Mill 2002, p. 72). That is, the will energetically governing the strong impulse to obey can turn to the customary, to that which is pursued by a purely formal will or will to governance as such in civilizations of no character. Such an alliance would be, then, a purely formal will to governance as such energetically governing a strong impulse to obey, the mark of what I will call a reactionary character.

#### *THE SOCIETY OF PROGRESS AND THE PARADOXICAL STAGNATION OF IMPROVEMENT AS A CUSTOM*

If the progressive principle is more easily realized through the spirit of liberty, even if it might well ally itself with the customary in the formation of a reactionary character, it remains to be seen what the content of this principle is, what 'the better' or 'improvement' might mean. Clarifying this content seems especially important in that Mill understands these terms as synonymous with 'progress', itself also synonymous with what prevents the stagnation of a civilization without character. The contest between progress and custom is, in *On Liberty*, "the chief interest of the history of mankind." The book never defines the former, but there are clues: Utility, "the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions," is taken as "grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being." In politics, the opposition between "a party of order or stability, and a party of progress or reform" keeps each side within reasonable bounds. More importantly, if an individual has no character, if their impulses are not their own, "there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress." Further, individuality maintains progress (Mill 2002, pp. 73, 13,

48, and 58). Thus, progress seems to be the collective result of individuality. Only in this way does the question of civil or social liberty properly touch on the question of the individual over whom society might legitimately claim power.

Not all societies have structured themselves on individuality, but on Mill's understanding that would be why they stagnated and were overcome by energetic barbarians, whether Visigoth or British. In addition, if modernity is marked by a will energetically governing a strong impulse to obey, neither is it itself precisely or necessarily structured on individuality. Indeed, Mill's own British society is, he claims, at "war" with individuality. At the same time, this society understands itself to be both "the most progressive people who ever lived" and "progressive *as well as* changeable." In addition to its progressiveness, to its impulse for something better than the customary, nineteenth-century British society pursues, according to Mill, changes and improvements for their own sake, without relation to individuality (Mill 2002, p. 73; my emph.). Its self-flattery thus shows how progress without individuality is an empty concept, displays a lack of character, and so is headed for a paradoxical form of stagnation, where improvement becomes a custom, lacking any impulse except the purely formal will to governance.

### **THE SOCIETY OF INDIVIDUALITY AND ENTROPIC CHARACTER**

If progress is the collective result of individuality, what is individuality, as distinct from the individual? For this, Mill turns to Wilhelm von Humboldt's *Sphere and Duties of Government*. There, individuality requires freedom, or Mill's civil and social liberty, which will allow for the development of human powers into "a complete and consistent whole." It also requires a variety of situations. The unification of freedom and variety leads to what Humboldt calls "*originality*" (Humboldt 1854, pp. 13 and 11; cited in Mill 2002, p. 59) by allowing for what Mill calls "experiments in living" (Mill 2002, p. 83). That is, through the unification of civil or social liberty with different circumstances in which to experiment with one's life, one's energy will be cultivated, developed, and, perhaps, enhanced.

At the same time, for Mill one ought not experiment with one's life "as if nothing whatever had been known in the world before they came into it." The role of education, specifically in virtue, is to cultivate the social and self-regarding virtue with the awareness that the latter is "second in importance, if even second" by bringing to light previous experiments in living such that one takes on their lessons within oneself. Thus, precisely insofar as this liberty or freedom is civil or social and not of the will, there are to be conditions on its development and cultivation, i.e., Mill's famous harm principle: "the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." Preventing harm to others is the social "compression" that prevents "stronger specimens of human nature from encroaching on the rights of others," à la the ancient form of tyranny. In being compressed, these specimens are cultivated into strong characters with wills that have "the good of others for their object" (Mill 2002, pp. 59-60, 78, 11, and 65). In cultivating a society structured on individuality through the compression of strong energies directed toward the appropriate realm of good for others, a directing disconnected from the force of either ancient tyranny or the society of the spirit of improvement, more experiments in living informed by previous experiments will be cultivated

and the number of Humboldt's varieties of situations increased.

Individuality is thus the formal principle for social organization, the structure whereby energies are cultivated into strong characters with strong wills directed toward others' goods. The energies as such do not direct these characters except via an education that both prioritizes social over self-regarding virtues and allows individuals to take on or reject for themselves previous experiments in living. Following this principle, social value emerges in the multiplication of experiments in living grounded in that prioritization. Individuality, then, grows of itself.

Precisely as a formal principle, i.e., as a form conceptualized as logically precedent to and socially prioritized over and above the individual as such, individuality seems to emerge as the point where Mill's system begins to, not grow of itself, but rather spin of its own accord into systemic collapse. That is, the society of individuality seems to lead to what I will call entropic character.<sup>23</sup>

In cultivating individuality, one's powers, one's abilities to enact change, will be enhanced and fully developed. As a result, one's energies will be cultivated within the constraints of social values such that a society will emerge with strong wills directing strong impulses of one's own toward others' good and, at a minimum, the multiplication of experiments of living gives more examples from which to learn how one might live. Yet a society structured on the cultivation of individuality remains structured, given a formal principle by which its will is to govern and direct energies and impulses. A society of individuality could, similarly to that of progress, emerge as a will directing energies toward individuality for its own sake, to the endless search for something of one's own merely for the sake of calling it one's own.

Most people's energies are not very strong and, as a result, "It does not occur to them to have any inclinations, except for what is ordinary." In a society of progress and/or improvement, examples of cultivated individuality lead to the resentment of individuality in general. However, in a society of individuality, Mill expects a multiplication of experiments in living via such examples. Indeed, he claims that, "without them, human life would become a stagnant pool." Yet, qua examples, these individuals will be "more valuable" both to themselves and to others. To be sure, they cannot claim more than "freedom to point out" ways of living other than the customary (Mill 2002, pp. 63, 66, 65, and 69). The risk of their claiming more than that freedom is the risk of a society of improvement, not that of a society of individuality.

The risk of the society of individuality is also, unlike that of the society of progress, the will to change of which paradoxically governs energies emptied of content beyond the impulse to obey the will to change. Instead, the society of individuality risks the ironic stagnation of a society governed by the custom of individuality. That is, it risks becoming a society whose individuals, most of whom are not examples and so are lesser in value to both themselves and others, cannot discern between what experiments in living are appropriate for themselves and the custom of claiming themselves to be experimenting and exemplifying, who are incapable of distinguishing between experimentation and the value of being an example of experimentation. This would be the stagnation of a will to be individual governing energies that, because the

<sup>23</sup> Nine years before *On Liberty* was published, Rudolf Clausius published his first observations of energy dissipation and, in 1865, coined the term 'entropy' to describe this process (See Clausius 1850 and 1865). The extent to which Mill was aware of Clausius's articles is unclear, at least to me, although Herman Daly seems to see an unstated connection to entropy in Mill's 1857 *Principles of Political Economy* (see Daly, April 23, 2019).



modern character is characterized by the impulse to obey, do not exist beyond the assertion of individuality. These energies spin out into nothing, meaningless beyond the assertion itself.

## CONCLUSION

Again following Baum, Mill's understanding of power is the ability to bring about a desired change. Also again, Mill equates energy with strong desires or impulses such that one with their own impulses has character, one without their own impulses has no character, and one with strong impulses governed by a strong will has energetic character. Civilizations can become stagnant, lacking the energy or impulses to defend themselves such that the wills governing their energies are purely formal, defended merely on the grounds of their being customary, and so hostile to individuality. Situations like this leave open the door to 'barbarians' with the energy to destroy and reinvigorate those societies. Mill seems to endorse such an event in that social stagnation, qua marked by a will that governs no energy, is irrevocable.

Modernity is marked partly by the size of its societies, a size that precludes the need for rulers to be of characters energetic enough that their wills govern others, and partly by the change in morality brought about by the rise of Christianity's passivity and privatization of values in combination with pagan social or public values. As a result, the modern character is that of a strong will governing a strong impulse to obey.

Thus, a split occurs between the spirits of improvement and improvement and of liberty and the modern reactionary character emerges. The impulse of the spirit of improvement gives it a disposition to force the unwilling to adopt what it takes to be better than the customary, which brings about a reaction in the unwilling that itself leads to a disposition, via modernity's impulse to obey, to adhere to something better than the spirit of improvement, that is, to the customary.

The bulwark against both the stagnation of societies with no character and the emergence of the reactionary character is the recognition that only the spirit of liberty and individuality guarantee progress. Social progress is the result of the collective cultivation of individuality but is not change for its own sake, which would lead to the paradoxical stagnation of the disposition for something better than the customary becoming itself a custom.

A society of custom can stagnate because its will governs no energy. A society of the spirit of improvement can give rise to a reactionary character, wherein the will governs energies seeking out the customary as better than improvement. A society of progress can lead to the paradoxical stagnation of change becoming a custom and the will directing energies to change for its own sake, thus emptying energy and impulse of content. While in certain structural ways a stagnant society of individuality may appear similar to a stagnant society of progress, they remain distinct insofar as the latter's stagnation is paradoxical. There is instead an irony at work in a stagnant society of individuality in its stagnation, i.e., the zero point of velocity, is an entropy, i.e., the dissipation of thermodynamic energy.

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