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THE ETHICAL WORK OF CHARACTER: Reading *On Liberty* as an Aesthetic Manual

Sean Donaghue Johnston

AS MICHEL FOUCAULT observes, “We have hardly any remnant of the idea in our society that the principal work of art which one must take care of, the main area to which one must apply aesthetic values, is oneself, one’s life, one’s existence” (“Genealogy” 271). In the first sentence of the “Introductory” to *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill states plainly that the subject of his essay is “Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual” (69). Here Mill is far from characterizing his work as an “aesthetic” project. He claims that he is concerned primarily with the relationship between self and society, or between “Liberty and Authority” (70). As a result, *On Liberty* has traditionally been read as belonging in the liberal canon as a juridico-philosophical text: That is, it has been read as an attempt to define the legitimate exercise of both state and social power over “the individual,” who is taken as given and, therefore, already-constituted. At first glance, then, Mill does not appear to be concerned at all with the aesthetic relationship to oneself, in which one “works upon” oneself as a work of art and thus “fashions” oneself into a particular kind of being.

Yet, despite this initial impression, a more careful reading shows that Mill is deeply concerned with the aesthetic relationship to oneself. He states: “Among the *works* of man [*sic*], which human life is rightly employed in *perfecting and beautifying*, the first in importance surely is man himself [*sic*],” and “It is not by wearing down into uniformity all that is individual in themselves, but by cultivating it, and calling it forth . . . that human beings

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become *a noble and beautiful object of contemplation*" (127, 131, italics mine). It is in line with these comments that, in "The Cultivation of Individuality: Foucault Reading Mill," Michael Clifford argues convincingly that *On Liberty* can be read as what Foucault calls an "aesthetic manual" or a "manual for living" (29). Clifford claims that *On Liberty* invites one to take up an ethical relationship to oneself and to constitute oneself as a political subject or "individual" or, in other words, that *On Liberty* initiates the moral and aesthetic process of self-formation or subjectivation by which one actually "becomes" an individual. Clifford explains that this Foucauldian reading of Mill should make it possible to identify a technology of the self that is "representative, in many ways, of the Liberal Tradition as a whole" (29).

In this essay, I follow Clifford's lead in reading *On Liberty* as an aesthetic manual. However, I approach the text from a different perspective: I read *On Liberty* not in relation to what Clifford posits as "the Liberal Tradition as a whole" but rather in relation to Mill's other works and their Victorian discourse setting. When *On Liberty* is read under the light of Mill's sciences of ethology and associationist psychology, and thus resituated in the more specific discursive field that gives it its meaning, what emerges is not a technology of the self that is representative of "the Liberal Tradition as a whole," but rather a Victorian (liberal-democratic) "aesthetics of existence" that has all but disappeared from contemporary liberal-democratic discourse. Although this aesthetics of existence cannot exactly be "reactivated" today, it indicates a certain affiliation between politics and aesthetics that has been largely obscured by the history of liberalism, but which may nevertheless enrich one's self-understanding as a liberal-democratic individual.

According to Foucault, the relationship to oneself has four major aspects:

1. The *ethical substance*, by which Foucault means the "prime material" of one's moral conduct, thus, the specific part of oneself or of one's behavior that one works upon in order to fashion oneself into a particular kind of subject (*Use* 26).
2. The *mode of subjection*, or "the way in which the individual establishes his [*sic*] relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice" (*Use* 27).

3. The *ethical work*, or the “work” that one must perform upon the ethical substance, that is, upon oneself, in order to become a particular type of subject.
4. The *telos*, or the aim of the ethical work that one performs upon oneself, that is, the type of subject that one wishes to become or the state of being that one seeks to attain.

Like Clifford, I think that all of these aspects are present in Mill’s *On Liberty*. However, unlike Clifford, I consider them from ethological and associationist standpoints. By identifying these aspects in relation to their original discursive field, I expose how Mill addresses his Victorian contemporaries and how he invites them to fashion themselves into liberal-democratic individuals.

ETHICAL SUBSTANCE: CHARACTER

As I said above, the first major aspect of the relationship to oneself is the *ethical substance*, or that upon which one works in order to become a particular kind of subject. Clifford identifies this aspect in Mill’s work as *freedom*, or “the liberty of the *individual* to pursue certain interests in the civil or social sphere” (30). According to Clifford, Mill directs his readers to problematize and “work upon” their freedom, “considered in relation to the exercise of power,” in order to “legitimize a space of emergence for the ‘private, autonomous individual’” (30, 32). By working upon one’s freedom, then, one opens up a “space of emergence” within which one is able to define one’s “individuality” over and against the state and society. I believe that Clifford is correct to characterize this position as representative of “the Liberal Tradition as a whole” for it evokes the familiar theme of the tension between power and freedom, the state/society and the individual, public and private. And indeed, the relationship between one’s freedom and the exercise of power is a central theme in *On Liberty*. Yet when one shifts one’s perspective from “the Liberal Tradition as a whole” to the particular problems with which Mill and his contemporaries were concerned, one discovers another ethical substance that is both familiar (going back to the ancient Greeks) and yet unfamiliar (due to the prioritization of right over good typical to liberalism): namely, *character*.

According to Stefan Collini, the Victorian period witnessed the “increased circulation of the language of character” (40). The idea of character was by no means a new idea in the nineteenth century, for it can be traced all the way back to the ancient

Greeks (from whom Mill derives the term *ethology*, which is the name for his proposed science of character). Yet in the nineteenth century “character” was deployed in new ways and occupied a central place in political-economic discourse. Collini cites one “Socialist commentator” who, writing in the 1890s, was able to articulate its importance in political-economic discourse: “Today the key word . . . in economics is ‘character’. . . . [The reason] why individualist economists fear socialism is that they believe it will deteriorate character, and the reason why socialist economists seek socialism is their belief that under individualism character is deteriorating” (30). The Victorian period was thus marked by what can be called a concern for character.¹

Most, if not all, of Mill’s social and political works are preoccupied, in one way or another, with the formation and cultivation of human character. In the *System of Logic* (1843), Mill begins the elaboration of ethology as a *science* of character. The purpose of ethology is to determine how social and political circumstances influence the development of character, so that legislators will be able to develop, alter, and even control the character of individuals, social groups, or even nations through the deliberate manipulation of their circumstances. The idea is that social, political, economic, and legal institutions can all be arranged so that they produce whatever type of character is desired. It is for this reason that, in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), Mill refers to “the laws of the influence of circumstances on character” as “the most important department of psychology” (24).

When conditions are right, Mill expects legislators to help create a *liberal* atmosphere in order to produce an *active* type of character.² In *Considerations on Representative Government* (1861), Mill describes the active or energetic character, which is already a product of its circumstances, as one that “endeavours to make circumstances bend to itself” (227). Thus, in a liberal culture, there arises a reciprocal relationship between character and its circumstances: The active character *works upon itself indirectly* by molding and shaping the circumstances that make it what it is. As Mill puts it in the *Autobiography* (published posthumously in 1873):

though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances; and . . . what is really inspiring and ennobling in the doctrine of free-will, is the convic-

tion that we have real power over the formation of our own character; that our will, by influencing some of our circumstances, can modify our future habits or capabilities of willing. (*Autobiography* 119)

For Mill, then, the relationship to oneself is directed outward and it is mediated by one's actions and by one's influence upon the external world.

If *On Liberty* (1859) can be read as an aesthetic manual addressed to Victorian readers, its object is not freedom but rather the character of individuals in a liberal culture. Freedom, or civil liberty, is in fact one of the *circumstances* that contribute to the formation of character,³ though its influence is somewhat equivocal. On the one hand, a popular form of government which secures the freedom of all citizens is absolutely necessary for the development of an active type of character. As Mill says:

The maximum of *the invigorating effect of freedom upon the character* is only obtained when the person acted on either is, or is looking forward to becoming, a citizen as fully privileged as any other. What is still more important than even this matter of feeling is the practical discipline which the *character* obtains from the occasional demand made upon the citizens to exercise, for a time and in their turn, some social function. (*Considerations* 232-233, italics mine)

Popular government has a positive effect on character for at least two reasons: First, it distributes privileges equally, and thus provides all citizens with the social and political conditions necessary for their dignity and self-respect; second, it requires its citizens to take an active part in its administration, exercising their mental and moral faculties as well as making them feel that they have a stake in their government's success. Under these circumstances, citizens have both the political means and the confidence to shape and mold their circumstances. Thus, popular government produces an active character. Despotism has the opposite effect on the character of its subjects:

Their *passivity* is implied in the very idea of absolute power. The nation as a whole, and every individual composing it, are without any potential voice in their own destiny. They exercise no will in respect to their collective interests. All is decided for them by a will not their own, which it is legally a crime for them to disobey. *What sort of human beings can be formed under such a regimen? What development can either their thinking or their active faculties attain under it?* (*Considerations* 218-219)

Despotic government produces the passive type of character, since its citizens, or rather its subjects, are not at all accustomed to having the power to influence their circumstances. And of course this state of affairs and the obedience that follows from it are precisely what the despot requires: “Now there can be no kind of doubt that the passive type of character is favoured by the government of the one or a few, and the active self-helping type by that of the Many” (*Considerations* 231).

But on the other hand, popular government is also capable of becoming “despotic,” for it can give rise to a “tyranny of the majority.” In particular, it can give rise to “the despotism of custom.” Conformity to custom and fear of public opinion are as effective at producing a passive character as despotism, if not more so. Just as the subjects of a despotic government exercise no will in respect to their collective interests, the individual who merely conforms to the dictates of custom exercises no will in respect to his or her own individual interests: “He who does anything because it is the custom makes no choice” (*On Liberty* 126). Although custom and opinion make up a large part of the circumstances that shape character in any type of regime, Mill believes that they play a particularly prominent role in the liberal-democratic state. After all, the liberal-democratic state is governed by “the people,” that is, by society, or the masses. This means that the ruling power is omnipresent, for it surrounds everyone in the form of friends, neighbors, coworkers, and the like. This situation, as Mill describes it, is uncannily reminiscent of the Panopticon, Jeremy Bentham’s plan for a prison that subjects its segregated prisoners to the prospect that they *may* be observed (by unobserved guards in a central tower) at any given time. Ideally, prisoners of the Panopticon will regulate their own behavior — or as Foucault puts it in *Discipline and Punish*, they will become the principle of their own subjection (203) — because they cannot help but act *as if they are always being watched*. Panoptic techniques are not limited to the architecture of the prison: They can be used in factories, schools, hospitals, reformatories, and similar institutions. For Mill, they invade all aspects of life, and they are used to uphold a “social control” that extends well beyond the limits of political power: “In our times, from the highest class of society down to the lowest, every one lives as under the eye of a hostile and dreaded censorship” (Mill 1993, 129). As Janice Carlisle

notes in her account of Mill's philosophy, "Public opinion, custom, habit all man the central tower in [Mill's] panoptical society so that there is no privacy; what concerns only the 'individual and the family' is rigorously controlled by 'social tyranny'" (John Stuart 203).

Popular government is thus in reality the government "of each by all the rest" (*On Liberty* 72). It enables society as a whole to practice "a social tyranny [that is] more formidable than many kinds of political oppression, since, though not usually upheld by such extreme penalties, it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" (*On Liberty* 73). Character tends to become passive under these circumstances because it bends to the massive force of custom and opinion. *On Liberty* thus confronts the following problem: How is it possible to cultivate an active character under these accidental circumstances of a liberal-democratic state? How can one work upon one's own character and thus maintain a reciprocal relationship between character and custom?

For Mill, then, freedom is a secondary concern. The conflict between society and the individual, between "Liberty and Authority" — that is, the *traditional* problem of liberalism — is in this case subordinated to the Victorian discourse of character. As one of Mill's contemporary reviewers expresses it, *On Liberty* is written not in the interest of freedom for its own sake, but rather "in the sincere foreboding that the *strong individualities* of the old types of English *character* are in imminent danger of being swallowed up in those *political and social influences* which emanate from *large masses of men*" (Anon. 123, italics mine). Likewise, James Fitzjames Stephen, another contemporary of Mill's, observes that there is a "tacit assumption which pervades every part of [chapter 3 of *On Liberty*] that the removal of restraints usually tends to *invigorate character*" (147, italics mine). Where these two critics disagree with Mill (and with each other) is not on the priority of character, but rather on the best means of cultivating an *active* character. Stephen, for example, believes that "[h]abitual exertion is the greatest of all invigorators of character"; thus, he argues for "restraint and coercion in one form or another" instead of the liberty or "removal of restraints" advocated by Mill (147). And Mill's anonymous reviewer (cited above) suggests that *On Liberty* focuses on character at the wrong level: "There is no ele-

ment so utterly absent, from the first page to the last, as any indication of sympathy with the free play of a *national or social character* in its natural organic action.” The word “liberty,” he continues, “means a great deal more than the mere absence of restraints on the individual; it implies that fresh and unconstrained play of *national character*, that fullness of social life and vivacity of public energy, *which it is one of the worst results of such constraint to subdue or extinguish*” (133, italics mine). Notice that despite their disagreements, Mill, his anonymous reviewer, and Stephen all evaluate civil liberty, or “the absence of restraints on the individual,” on the basis of its influence upon *character* (whether individual or national).

In *On Liberty*, Mill advances the following principle:

that the sole end for which mankind are warranted, individually or collectively, in interfering with the liberty of action of any of their number, is self-protection. That the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. (78)

Mill is convinced that this principle, which entails the removal or absence of “restraints” on the individual, is one of the conditions necessary for the cultivation of an active character. It requires “that free scope should be given to varieties of character, short of injury to others” (*On Liberty* 124). It thus provides a counterbalance to some of the negative effects of popular government, for it gives one the opportunity to deviate from custom and to develop one’s own character in one’s own way without fear of interference or punishment from society.

Yet for Mill, the mere “removal of restraints” is not enough to guarantee the development of an active type of character. After all, an active character is by definition more than just a product of its circumstances. As an aesthetic manual, then, *On Liberty* urges its readers to cultivate their own characters. Mill is addressing a Victorian audience, whose “ideal of character,” he believes, “is to be without any marked character” (*On Liberty* 138). Or as Richard B. Friedman puts it, he is addressing *non-individuals* who “dislike independence and place no value on variety” (293-4). One is not an “individual” in the relevant sense when one submits to the “the magical influence of custom” or when one has no will or inclination “except for what is customary” (*On Liberty* 138, 129). *On Liberty*, then, is not simply a defense of individual

freedom: It is an appeal to “non-individuals” to *become* individuals by cultivating an active character. For once the necessary social and political conditions have been provided for, the actual work of cultivation must be left to the individual character.

As Janice Carlisle explains, Mill uses the term *character* to signify a human being’s “capacity” to act or to be acted upon “by other human beings and by their shared circumstances” (1). This “capacity” is the condition of possibility for one’s thoughts, desires, inclinations, actions, and choices. To say that different circumstances produce different types of character, then, is to say that they produce human beings who are capable of experiencing different sorts of pleasures and pains, and from different sources, or who are capable of thinking in abstract but not practical terms, or vice versa. The desire of women “to be liked, loved, or admired” by those who are closest to them, “by those whom they see with their eyes,” is a “trait of character” that is “the natural result of their circumstances,” while the “love of fame in men,” the need to be admired and esteemed by complete strangers, is the result of different circumstances and a different education (*Subjugation* 81). (Also, one’s capacity to experience the “higher” pleasures described in *Utilitarianism* — that is, the aesthetic and intellectual pleasures — is an aspect of one’s character that must be actively cultivated (see Heydt 286): “Capacity for the nobler feelings is in most natures a very tender plant, easily killed, not only by hostile influences, but by mere want of sustenance” (*Utilitarianism* 10-11).)

If one is going to be able to become an individual by cultivating one’s own character, then one must be careful not to mistake “temporary or local phases of human character for human nature itself” (*Auguste* 83). For Mill, history is an indispensable part of one’s education, for it reveals “the extraordinary susceptibility of human nature to external influences, and the extreme variability of those of its manifestations which are supposed to be most universal and uniform” (*Subjection* 23). Human nature is essentially unsettled and there can be no final word on what human beings are capable of doing or experiencing. Thus, for Mill, it is always possible to enlarge one’s character beyond the limits of one’s circumstances, no matter how “natural” and “universal” they may appear, so that one will become capable of ex-

periencing new pleasures and desires and so that one can learn to think and act in uncustomary ways.

MODE OF SUBJECTION: UTILITY, AESTHETICS

The second aspect of the ethical relationship to oneself is the *mode of subjection*, or “the way in which people are invited or incited to recognize their moral obligation” (Foucault 2006, 239). Why should one cultivate one’s character? Why is it better for one to develop an active or energetic rather than a passive character, one’s individual rather than one’s national or group character? In other words, why should one become an individual? For Mill, the answer is ultimately *utility*.⁴ Character cultivation is conducive to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people:

Where, not the person’s own character, but the traditions or customs of other people are the rule of conduct, there is wanting one of the principal ingredients of human happiness, and quite the chief ingredient of individual and social progress. (*On Liberty* 124)

An active character is willing to question the status quo and set a new and better example for others: “[I]mprovement in human affairs is wholly the work of the uncontented characters” (*Considerations* 227). Thus, it is for its own sake that society should allow freedom of speech, liberty of tastes and pursuits, and freedom of association, for a liberal culture will provide a forum for social change while actively cultivating the kind of character that is capable of initiating such change: “Eccentricity has always abounded when and where strength of character has abounded; and the amount of eccentricity in a society has generally been proportional to the amount of genius, mental vigour, and moral courage it contained” (*On Liberty* 135).

But there is another reason why an active character is conducive to happiness. Circumstances are never completely alike for any two individuals, though there are likely to be certain resemblances or uniformities that lead to the formation of a “type” of character. One is not necessarily destined to conform to any particular type of character, for one’s own peculiar circumstances make it possible to develop one’s individual character in other directions: “It is for him to find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to his own circumstances and character” (*On Liberty* 126). However, “the magical influence of custom”

has a normalizing and socializing effect on the individual, so that she comes to view the norm as “human nature itself” and anything that varies from it as “an unaccountable aberration which [she] cannot mentally realize” (“Inaugural” 366). As a result, the individual’s character becomes “passive” and it bends to custom. Instead of working on itself, it fits itself into one of the “small number of moulds” that society provides. In this case, the individual clearly does not realize the full potential of her character or “nature,” and she becomes incapable of experiencing new and uncustomary pleasures and desires. She lets society choose her plan of life for her, so that she “has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation” (*On Liberty* 126). For Mill, however, happiness consists in the active exercise of one’s faculties and in the cultivation of one’s character. The best way to promote happiness, then, is to give “free scope . . . to varieties of character, short of injury to others” (124). Otherwise, individuals merely follow custom “until by dint of not following their own nature they have no nature to follow” (129).

Also, the more that one cultivates and enlarges one’s character, the more diverse and the more enjoyable one’s pleasures will become. Mill is addressing a society that limits its enjoyments to what is customary: “[E]ven in what people do for pleasure, conformity is the first thing thought of; . . . they exercise choice only among things commonly done: peculiarity of taste, eccentricity of conduct, are shunned equally with crimes” (*On Liberty* 129). Consistent with Mill’s associationist psychology, this conformity or adherence to custom has a stunting effect on character. Once an associative link has been forged between conformity and pleasure, one becomes physically and mentally incapable of experiencing as pleasurable anything that is uncustomary. For Mill, character is the capacity to act and to be acted upon, and it is entirely possible for one to lose the capacity to be “acted upon” by things that would otherwise give one pleasure. One example is intellectual activity. Wendy Donner explains that, according to Mill, there is nothing intrinsically pleasurable about the “higher” pleasures described in *Utilitarianism*, and so it is necessary to “forge an associative link between our enjoyments and our intellectual activities” (107). In fact, Mill’s mental crisis was brought on by intense intellectual activity that was entirely devoid of pleasure.⁵ It was only by working on his own character, by acquiring a

“taste” for what he would come to refer to as the “higher pleasures” (almost as one acquires a taste for wines or scotches⁶), that he was able to reach the point where he would prefer intellectual pleasures, even when they are attended by “acute suffering,” to purely physical pleasures (*Utilitarianism* 9-10). Such a point can only be reached by cultivation and ethical work.

The mode of subjection for Mill, then, is by no means a strictly *aesthetic* mode, as it was for the ancient Greeks. According to Foucault, the ancient Greek mode of subjection was “that we have to build our existence as a beautiful existence” (“Genealogy” 266): That is, the work that the Greeks performed upon themselves was for the sake of conferring a sort of aesthetic value on their lives. For Mill, however, utility is “the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions” (*Utilitarianism* 79): One should work upon one’s character because it is conducive to the greatest happiness for the greatest number of people, not because it will make one’s existence more “beautiful.” But in *On Liberty*, Mill understands utility “in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a progressive being”⁷ (79). And the “progressiveness” of humankind sometimes appears in Mill’s works to have an intimate affiliation with beauty: “Among the *works* of man [*sic*], which human life is rightly employed in *perfecting and beautifying*, the first in importance surely is man himself [*sic*]” (*On Liberty* 127). In fact, as Mill explains elsewhere, one who cultivates one’s own character is a sort of artist:

Art, when really cultivated, and not merely practiced empirically, maintains, what it first gave the conception of, an ideal Beauty, to be eternally aimed at, though surpassing what can be actually attained; and by this idea it trains us never to be completely satisfied with imperfection in what we ourselves do and are: to idealize, as much as possible, every work we do, and most of all, *our own characters and lives*. (“Inaugural” 408, italics mine)

Though it is not always clear, there is a natural affinity between utility and aesthetics, “between goodness and the cultivation of the Beautiful” (“Inaugural” 407). Thus, one cultivates one’s character not only for the sake of one’s own happiness and that of society in general, but also for the sake of making oneself (and humankind as a whole) “a noble and beautiful object of contemplation” (*On Liberty* 131).

ETHICAL WORK: INDIVIDUALITY AND CHARACTER-WRITING

In order to become an individual, one must “work” upon oneself or upon one’s own character. The third aspect of the relationship to oneself is the *ethical work*, or the *self-forming activity*. Foucault asks: “What are the means by which we can change ourselves in order to become ethical subjects?” (2006, 265). For Mill, the answer is individuality. Individuality is a sort of activity through which one both ascertains and shapes one’s character. It is not, however, to be confused with random eccentricity, for it is rather a deliberate work upon circumstances and character. It is through individuality that one tests one’s character and expands it beyond the limits of custom. One must be able to ask oneself: Why do I follow this particular plan of life? Is it because it suits my character, or because it is expected of me? What else am I capable of? For Mill, the individual must neither follow custom blindly nor abandon it altogether: Rather, she must “find out what part of recorded experience is properly applicable to [her] own circumstances and character” (*On Liberty* 126).

One way of carrying out this ethical work is by means of a version of self-writing that Janice Carlisle outlines in her book *John Stuart Mill and the Writing of Character*. Mill’s own works as a whole constitute a significant part of his *character* to the extent that they “act upon” both the minds of others and the circumstances of the liberal cultures that they have influenced. This means that Mill’s character continues to act upon his modern readers, and perhaps also continues to be *acted upon*, since our perceptions of Mill have certainly changed over the past hundred and fifty years or so. And this is at least one of the reasons, according to Carlisle, that Mill was so obsessed with organizing and revising all of his works:

By putting the same name on one’s various works, by recording each of them in ledger-like fashion, or by meticulously revising new editions of the same works, one can establish both a stable and a changing identity. (25)

Mill wanted to control how his works would be perceived by others, both in his lifetime and after his death, because he did not want to lose control of his character. Revision allowed him to change what was already “fixed” in writing, so that by the end of his career he would be able to present the final, official edition of

his character in writing. Thus, Carlisle describes Mill as a sort of “artist of character” (219).

Whether Mill’s wish to control his character through revision is realistic or not, character-writing is important as a practical exercise of individuality. Writing enables one to scrutinize, test, and even modify custom, depending of course on one’s success as a writer. It affords one the opportunity to work on one’s own character by cultivating originality and independent thinking. And at the very least, it puts one’s character on paper and makes it visible to oneself and to others, so that one can determine whether and to what extent it is “under the spell” of custom. In keeping with his associationist upbringing, Mill views character itself as “written onto one by one’s experiences” (Carlisle 3). Writing is thus “a way of revising what experience has written”; that is, it is “a way of rewriting character” (227).

TELOS: HAPPINESS

The last aspect of the relationship to oneself is the *telos*: “Which is the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way? For instance, shall we become pure, or immortal, or free, or masters of ourselves, and so on?” (Foucault 2006, 265). The aim of all this ethical work is, of course, *happiness*: “there is in reality nothing desired except happiness” (*Utilitarianism* 39). This formula may appear to be an empty tautology, but this is only because happiness is something that must be worked out and given content by the individual. Mill’s definition of happiness as “pleasure, and absence of pain” (7), is somewhat misleading because the experience of pleasure and pain is almost entirely relative to character. In accordance with Mill’s associationism, it is simply a matter of forging an associative link between the (indeterminate) sensation of pleasure and a particular object or state of being. This explains why Spartans can train themselves to be virtually insensible to pain, for example, or why drinkers are able to develop “an acquired taste” for fine wines or scotches. All of this is accomplished by education “in the wider sense,” that is, by “[w]hatever helps to shape the human being — to make the individual what he is, or hinder him from being what he is not” (“Inaugural” 354).

A particular type of character will be capable of experiencing particular types of pleasures, desires, and inclinations. One’s goal

as an individual, then, is to cultivate and to expand one's own character, for one limits one's own potential when one pursues only generally recognized and customary sources of pleasure:

Such are the differences among human beings in their sources of pleasure, their susceptibilities of pain, and the operation on them of different physical and moral agencies, that unless there is a corresponding diversity in their modes of life, they neither obtain their fair share of happiness, nor grow up to the mental, moral, and *aesthetic* [NB] stature of which their nature is capable. (*On Liberty* 136, italics mine)

Thus, it is impossible to define happiness for everyone. In a liberal culture, individuals must be allowed to work upon their character in order to discover what happiness means for them, and in order to expand upon that meaning. For there are "no means by which any one else can discover for [people] what it is for their happiness to do or leave undone" (*Subjection* 27).

THE LIBERAL-DEMOCRATIC ETHOS

On Liberty addresses itself to its readers from two very different discursive fields. On the one hand, it speaks from within "the Liberal Tradition as a whole," where it takes its place, almost as a link in the chain, in the development of liberal political philosophy from Hobbes, Locke, and Bentham, to John Rawls and Robert Nozick. In this case, it reads as a juridico-philosophical project, and its conceptions of "liberty," "tolerance," and "individuality" are understood primarily in terms of their negative function as *limit* to state power. On the other hand, *On Liberty* speaks from an ethological and associationist position, in which case it addresses itself to Victorian readers and urges them to cultivate their character. The language of character may seem somewhat foreign and unfamiliar to modern readers, but the genealogy of the modern political subject must begin with the foreign and the unfamiliar. For if the Liberal Tradition appears to be a continuous whole, this is only because it tends to conceal its fragmented past.

The Victorian idea of character is certainly not something that we could simply "reactivate" today, or that we would even want to "reactivate" today. Neither Mill's proposed science of ethology nor the associationist psychology on which it was based was able to pass the test of history. Collini accounts for this fact by explaining that "deeper diggings by psychology into the ego's early ca-

reer, and the diffusion of profoundly sociologised notions of 'society' and its powers, have both proved inhospitable to the explanatory power of character" (49). And David E. Leary points out that among many other failings, "Mill's psychology was excessively intellectualistic," while the generation that followed him "became aware of the vast amount of recent research on the brain and nervous system and were beginning to realize the need to integrate this new knowledge into the science of Psychology" (155). Clearly, it would not be a very good idea for us to simply "reactivate" the pre-Freudian and "excessively intellectualistic" associationist psychology of John Stuart Mill.

Nevertheless, Mill's elaboration of character cultivation can still have a positive value for us today. In the final years before his death, Foucault surprised many of his readers by placing himself firmly within the Enlightenment tradition, of which he had been critical throughout the course of his career. He argued that one does not have to be faithful to the "doctrinal elements" of the Enlightenment in order to have roots in its tradition. Instead, one has only to take up the "attitude" or "ethos" of modernity:

And by 'attitude,' I mean a mode of relating to contemporary reality; a voluntary choice made by certain people; in the end, a way of thinking and feeling; a way, too, of acting and behaving that at one and the same time marks a relation of belonging and presents itself as a task. No doubt, a bit like what the Greeks called an *ēthos*. ("What?" 309)

Foucault characterizes the attitude of modernity as a "limit-attitude," for it is essentially a mode of being in which one ascertains and tests the limits of what one is in order to "go beyond" them ("What?" 317-319). It is a sort of work upon the self which involves a permanent critique of the various forces that constitute one as a subject. Foucault's own genealogies exhibit the attitude of modernity, by showing us that our identities are not necessary and universal but rather contingent and discontinuous, thus opening up for us "the possibility of no longer being, doing, or thinking what we are, do, or think" (315-316). One can discern a similar "ethos" or "attitude" at work in *On Liberty*. After all, Mill urges his readers to test the limits of their character and to "go beyond" the local and temporary forms of human nature that appear to be universal and necessary. He urges them to become individuals by refusing to allow contingent circumstances (which

include, among other things, differences in gender and race⁸) to determine the nature of their character.

Unlike Foucault, however, Mill views the state as a potentially positive and effective medium for self-cultivation. While Foucault deemphasizes the explanatory role of the state, locating the process of subjectivation in local and dispersed sites of power such as prisons, hospitals, schools, workhouses, and barracks, Mill considers all aspects of a nation's political constitution to have an important and largely controllable influence upon the character of citizens. This means that democratic participation and political engagement are potentially effective means of working upon one's character. One cultivates an active character by taking part in the various kinds of social change that can be effected through collective social action, for in doing so one helps to shape the circumstances that shape one's character. In *The Subjection of Women*, for example, Mill calls upon his (male) contemporaries to reform marriage laws and to extend the suffrage to women, thus also asking them to question the naturalness of Victorian gender norms: "The subjection of women to men being a universal custom, any departure from it quite naturally appears unnatural" (13). In other words, Mill invites his contemporaries to dismantle their very identities as men and women. In the United States today, we face a similar challenge: In the debate over the legalization of gay marriage, we are asked to reconsider the norms that govern our identities as gendered and sexually oriented subjects. If one chooses to push for the legalization of gay marriage, then one is contributing to the possible subversion and displacement of the norms to which one appeals whenever one identifies oneself as either "gay" or "straight." This means that one can work upon oneself *democratically*, since one has the potential to transform one's own identity by participating in political and social action.

Just as Foucault rejects the "doctrinal elements" of the Enlightenment while still taking up its ethos or attitude, we can take up Mill's liberal-democratic ethos today without falling back upon his now-obsolete associationist psychology. This would involve a reconceptualization of the relationship between self and state. For the state does not exercise its power over an already-constituted individual: The individual emerges as a subject through the very exercise of this power. One can thus cultivate a *reciprocal* re-

relationship between self and state in which one works upon one's own subjectivity via one's participation in political and social action. (This is not to say that we should place no limits at all on the use of state power, only that we should be careful not to conceive of state power as a purely negative and repressive force. As Foucault puts it, "power produces" (*Discipline* 194).) As an aesthetic manual, then, *On Liberty* offers a specifically liberal-democratic aesthetics of existence, for it privileges liberal-democratic culture as a productive forum for self-cultivation.

NOTES

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1. For works on Mill and the Victorian concern for character, see Carlisle 1991 and 1998, Collini 1983, Donner 1991, Heydt 2006, Kim 1988, Leary 1982, Smits 2004, and Varouxakis 1998a and 1998b.
2. This expectation is not without its Eurocentric implications, for Mill advocates a sort of "parental despotism or aristocracy" for peoples not yet "ready" for a liberal-democratic state. This despotism is, however, "only admissible as a means of gradually training the people to walk alone" (*Considerations* 214).
3. "In all states of human improvement ever yet attained, the nature and degree of authority exercised over individuals, the distribution of power, and the conditions of command and obedience, are *the most powerful of the influences*, except their religious belief, *which make them what they are, and enable them to become what they can be*" (*Considerations* 212, italics mine).
4. Clifford identifies the mode of subjection as the harm principle (discussed above) rather than utility, since the latter lacks specific content: "Utility may be the ultimate appeal, but utility must be necessarily vague (if not silent) when it comes to specifying our moral obligations with respect to individual freedom, simply because it is virtually impossible to predict (except in broad terms such as 'progress' and 'human development') what benefits will result from originality and spontaneity" (34). Nevertheless, utility has a very specific relation to the ethical substance of character, as I explain below.
5. See Mill's *Autobiography*: "Thus neither selfish nor unselfish pleasures were pleasures to me. And there seemed no power in nature sufficient to begin the formation of my character anew, and create in a mind now irretrievably analytic, fresh associations of pleasure with any of the objects of human desire" (98).
6. For a comparison of Mill's qualitative hedonism to wine-tasting, see Wendy Donner's chapter on "The Sensory Evaluation of Wines" in Donner 1991.

7. I should note that this formulation can be, and has been, interpreted in many different ways. See Singer 1977 for a famous *misinterpretation*.
8. See Mill 1988 for Mill's treatment of gender, and Varouxakis 1998a and 1998b for discussions of Mill's (sometimes unclear) attitude towards race.

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