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The liberal character of ethological governance

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Abstract

This paper examines the liberal government of 'character' from the perspective offered by those practices, strategies and techniques I term 'ethological governance'. Ethological governance is neither an ideology nor a tradition of thought, but denotes an orientation to human conduct that is organized by an explicit concern with character and its formation. The paper argues that ethological governance, especially in its Anglo-American strain, subscribes to a developmental notion of human conduct (i.e. character) and serves as a standard for liberal government by judging the responsible exercise of freedom. To this end, the paper examines how ethological governance establishes a context of government that harnesses character as a tool for social and political transformation in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by (1) explaining how character establishes a normative scale against which the capacity for individuals to practise their freedom is measured and (2) offering a symptomatic reading of those aspects of John Stuart Mill's work that deal with ethology in order to show how character indexes the judicious limits of government and serves as a basic test of citizenly competence.

Keywords: ethology; character; citizenship; freedom; governance; J. S. Mill.

For many years, the discussion of character and its discontents has been relegated to the annals of philosophical and psychological investigations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Character was ostensibly replaced as a way of conceptualizing human conduct by the apparently more sophisticated term 'personality' sometime during the mid-twentieth century (Susman 1979; White and Hunt 2000). Personality was said to better capture the demands of a growing market economy and a rising consumer society. If character signified

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the internalization of particular social values, personality constituted 'the construction of a set of dispositions unique to each individual which has no necessary or fixed content' (White and Hunt 2000: 104). With character's end seemingly so assured, it is surprising to note an increase in academic and popular interest in the theoretical, political and pedagogical dimensions of character in recent years (Eberly 1995; Hutcheon 1999; Josephson and Hanson 1998; Lickona 1991; McKinnon 1999; Sennett 1998). Here liberals and social conservatives have been especially vigorous in championing the 'return' of character in an apparent effort to revive a healthy civic culture based on shared community values and the virtues of good citizenship. It is in this context that the promotion of character education has been particularly virulent; its proponents have actively sought to develop civic virtue and moral character in young people in an effort to stem the tide of teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol addiction and media violence by cultivating a 'more compassionate and responsible society' on the basis of strong 'family values' (Brooks and Goble 1997; Eberly 1995; Lickona 1991; Loehrer 1998). One may be tempted to dismiss these observations as idiosyncratic attempts by neo-conservatives to amplify their profile in the public eye, but the continued proliferation of non-profit organizations such as 'Character Counts!' and the 'Character Education Partnership', in addition to the growth of national character education programmes in the UK, Canada and the US, suggests that there may be more at stake.

It is in this context that I want to suggest that it might be worthwhile to re-examine the role that character once played during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially in England and America, in order to shed some light on this apparent rekindling of interest in character and its formation. My aim, however, is not to focus on contemporary discussions about character but rather to use them as a point of departure in order to ask: what does it mean to govern through character? To do so is tacitly to abide by Foucault's insistence that the problem of government is best approached as a rationality of power that directs the conduct of individuals and groups. This approach has generated a rash of scholarly work concerned to analyse the range of strategies and techniques associated with the 'conduct of conduct' (Dean 1999; Hindess 2001; Rose 1999; Valverde 1996). Although far from uniform, such analyses are unified by an attempt to examine how the conduct of conduct enables 'individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a number of practices on their bodies and their souls, thoughts, conduct and way of being' (Foucault 1988: 18). The emergence in the nineteenth century of a specifically *liberal* rationality of government that is devoted to governing through the freedom of its citizens occurs alongside a desire to measure, normalize and monitor human conduct. Here liberalism refers not to the canon of liberal political philosophy or to a political ideology, but to a specific rationality of rule or ethos of government that governs at a 'distance'. It serves a critical reflection on government that is motivated by the realization that if one governs too much, one does not govern well (Foucault 1984: 242).

In this paper, I want to examine the liberal government of character through the context established by the complex of practices, strategies and techniques I term 'ethological governance'. By ethological governance, I mean the set of practices that is organized by a developmental notion of human conduct (i.e. character) that operates as a standard of liberal government and serves as an index for the responsible exercise of freedom. The language of ethology was popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in England and America as a way of designating the study of morality and human conduct. As such, it constituted neither an ideology nor a tradition of thought, but denoted historically specific practices that generated ways of being ethical and becoming political that were specifically organized by a concern with 'character'. Many studies have examined Anglo-American character formation in detail, and I am not interested to rehearse their findings here (Collini 1985; Macleod 1983; Mangan and Walvin 1987; McClellan 1999). Rather, my interest is to argue that ethological governance establishes a context that harnesses character as a tool for social and political transformation, and to examine the ways that ethological governance *individualizes* personal character through disciplined self-governance and *totalizes* it by standardizing conduct across populations. Indeed, what is particularly interesting about ethological governance is that it does not seek to inculcate externally validated morals, as one might customarily associate with 'character', but seeks rather to envisage new possibilities to know the self and, in turn, to care for the self. In other words, it is an example of what Nikolas Rose has termed 'ethico-politics', that is a concern with the range of '*self-techniques necessary for responsible government* and the *relations between one's obligation to oneself and to one's obligations to others*' (1999: 188, emphasis in original).

My discussion of ethology sets the stage for a symptomatic reading of the work of John Stuart Mill (1806–73), one that offers a unique opportunity to examine the conditions of possibility for ethological governance. His work is important insofar as he gives a sustained defence of ethology that is organized by an appreciation for the conditions of possibility of 'character' for citizenly competence. To be a competent member of the community one must demonstrate a degree of self-mastery; however, to self-actualize under conditions of liberalism, one must find ways of transgressing the limits of one's existence and effectively demonstrate the quality of one's character. As such, Mill's interest to develop a 'science of character formation' is easily situated in the context of his other writings that use character as a means for political reform.

As a first step, this paper elaborates the context of ethological governance on the basis of popular Anglo-American conceptions of character from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to demonstrate how character establishes a normative scale against which the capacity of individuals to practise their freedom is measured. The crucial role of the 'will' is examined in relation to the formation of good habits as a means of distinguishing character. Next, these reflections are explored in relation to

what Stephan Collini has termed the 'muscular liberalism' of John Stuart Mill. Mill's work exemplifies the way that character indexes the judicious limits of government and, in this fashion, serves as a basic test of citizenly competence (Collini 1991: 113). This discussion allows me to examine the ways that ethological governance forms an 'ethico-politics' in order to assess the limits and possibilities of the 'return' of character in the twenty-first century.

Ethological governance: character, habit and the question of the 'will'

The term 'ethological governance' is derived in part from the word 'ethology' which stems from the same Greek origins as *ethics* and *ethos*. Ethology's earliest mention dates back to the seventeenth century where it was used to mark the scientific approach to the study of human manners and morals (*OED*). Early nineteenth-century phrenologists commonly invoked the language of ethology as a means of legitimating the scientific investigation into the relation between mental affects and the body (Leary 1982). But, with the demise of phrenology as a 'legitimate' science by the mid-nineteenth century, ethology was no longer associated with human conduct, but became increasingly concerned with animal behaviour (Thorpe 1979). By the end of the nineteenth century, the 'human behaviour' sense of the word was eclipsed by the zoological study of animal behaviour. Between these two poles, however, lies a third meaning of the term that emerged in the mid-nineteenth century. It revived the scientific basis of the study of human ethics by proposing 'ethology' as a 'science of character formation'. Loosely based on the work of John Stuart Mill (1974 [1843]), this understanding of ethology designates a form of knowledge that analyses human character and its formation. This understanding of ethology, like many other moral and social sciences born in the nineteenth century, presumed 'man' as both the subject and object of investigation. But what makes this science of ethology distinct from its earlier counterparts is its specific focus on the ethical dimensions of *character* formation.[1]

What I term 'ethological governance', therefore, refers to those practices of government that were especially popular in Britain and North America from the late eighteenth century to the early twentieth century, practices that governed through the ethical constraints and possibilities of 'character'. Character operates here as the principal point of contact between technologies of the self and technologies of power, and helps to structure the possible action of oneself and others (Foucault 1988: 19). It is a discursive category that signifies a contingent ensemble of dispositions that guides an individual's ethical conduct. It is constituted by a complex of sometimes opposing but usually shared claims about the 'good' that are grounded in practices of the self that render 'character' visible through means such as a stiff upper lip, straight back and self-discipline. In the most general sense, dispositions refer to

properties or attributes of the self that are characteristic of 'virtues', such as honesty, loyalty and trustworthiness, or 'vices', such as laziness, lassitude and dishonesty, that together comprise the bulk of one's character. It is here that we come to understand how 'character' reflects an ideal that is agent-centred rather than act-centred; indeed, character promotes a view of moral conduct that seeks to dispense with *a priori* prescriptive codes. Character reflects an orientation to morality that assumes that it is impossible to prescribe rules for *every* form of conduct because one can never accurately anticipate what ethical course of action might be required in a morally ambiguous situation. Certainly, in cases where one's character is perceived to be unseemly or uncivilized, one may be subject to prescriptions in order to transform one's conduct (Hunt 1999a, 1999b; Valverde 1989). But as an ethical ideal, however, character seeks to sidestep an emphasis on acts by focusing on the qualities or dispositions of the ethical *person*. It is the presence of good, strong character that ultimately enables an individual to conduct themselves ethically and judiciously according to prevailing social norms. 'Lying', for instance, is not considered unethical because it is 'wrong' *per se*; it is unethical because it is dishonest. Thus, because 'dishonesty' is not governed by rule of law, it refers instead to a specific disposition of character (Crisp 1996: 5; Crisp and Slote 1997; McKinnon 1999: 1).

In governing through agents not acts, ethological governance adopts character as a general way of conceptualizing human conduct, but also, more specifically, as the principal criterion for evaluating the successful individuation of the liberal subject. Character is also significantly an ethic, a 'way of life' that expresses the constitutive whole of a particular individual and the collectivity or group to which she is attached. As a technology of liberal government, character is a tool that is used to evaluate the judicious deployment of governmental power at the same time that it serves as a complex means of discrimination. On the one hand, the display of dispositions such as reasonableness, independence, industry, reliability, trustworthiness and autonomy fashion the groundwork for liberal citizens who are capable of governing themselves. In contrast, the presence of dispositions revealing depravity, idleness and excessive dependence suggests that government has governed 'too little'. Conversely, evidence of social conformity, over-regulation and constraints on liberty reflects a 'character' that has been stifled, and is indicative of a government that has governed 'too much'.

By means of a wide range of practices such as examinations, self-deprivation, formal and informal training, ethological governance individualizes personal character and totalizes it. Ethological governance reflects an explicit concern with the moral formation of citizens that is driven by a conception of citizenship that is organized by individual self-improvement rather than by self-interest or natural right. As such, it becomes a critical vector for social and political reform. To this end, governing effectively requires that human conduct be increasingly measured, normalized and

monitored in order to avoid governing either too little or too much. Thus, the notion that governing through the freedom of citizens effectively places limits on government is one of the central features of liberal government *and* of ethological governance. But one of the distinctive aspects of liberal rationalities of rule, and of ethological governance in turn, is that they both rely on the capacity of individuals to govern themselves through their own freedom. What distinguishes them is that ethological governance is directly tied to character formation, whereas liberal government extends and exceeds ethological governance because it does not always govern through character.

In this vein, the critical channels for ethological governance throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have typically been moral education initiatives that centred on the role of the family and the school in order to develop character (Mangan and Walvin 1987; McClellan 1999; Susman 1979). Once children became of school age, formal education served to extend the foundations of character learned at home. In addition, the church (through vehicles such as Sunday school), along with community clubs (such as 4H Clubs, the Red Cross, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides) was, and often continues to be, an important site of character formation. The techniques for successful character formation are varied, but they generally consisted of activities such as accuracy in school work, attention to details of composition (spelling and punctuation), reading, writing and arithmetic through instruments such as textbooks, guidebooks and treatises, in addition to the reading of devotional texts, morality plays and inspirational literature. The learning and reading of moral fables, the memorization of 'moral rules', and the periodic use of special days and holidays in order to cultivate nationalism and patriotism were also especially significant.[2] Active participation in school government, along with extensive physical exercise and outdoor skills were also often important vehicles for character development. In this context, it is important to note that character formation was also typically highly gendered. Boys were subjected to cold showers and brisk exercise in order to develop virtues such as 'courage', whereas girls were entreated to protect their chastity and sexual purity. This combination of techniques was intended to cultivate personal virtues in both boys and girls, such as honesty, truthfulness, obedience and courtesy, and others, such as duty, responsibility and conscientiousness, in order to ensure the responsible practice of freedom.

This developmental view of human conduct fosters a paternalism that targets subjects that ostensibly need 'improvement', such as the poor, indigenous peoples, children and colonial others. Here ethological governance operates under the guise of 'reform' or 'philanthropic' projects that are typically based on progressivist or civilizational narratives (Cohn 1996; Hall 2002; Stoler 1994). Character comes to operate as a liberal norm that carves out exceptions in order to deny individuals or groups certain rights until they are capable of demonstrating effective self-government. Consequently, the right to demand rights by individuals and groups who are governed

ethologically has typically required the demonstration of character through effective self-discipline and self-control before they display sufficient character in order to be 'free'.

Although ethological governance is intimately bound to character formation, it is not reducible to it for the latter is typically indicative of a conception of the individual as the passive object of a process it cannot change or direct. Ethological governance, alternatively, produces individuals that are not simply complicit in their own self-government but are dedicated to the goal of self-improvement, and to their ultimate self-transformation. In other words, what the language of ethological governance manages to avoid is the deterministic aspects of character formation that generate seemingly docile bodies; it underscores a specifically *liberal* conception of character where one must make a choice in order to exercise freedom. To this end, ethological governance mobilizes character development as a practice of freedom that is committed to individual self-improvement where one seeks to avoid becoming a slave to one's appetites. By improving oneself, in other words, one demonstrates a concern for others that helps to gauge one's citizenly competence and thus works to determine the ethical type that is fit to rule.

If exercising one's character involves making a choice, then the question becomes: what helps the person of character to make an ethical choice? It is here that we begin to see the significant role that habits play in the cultivation of character. Samuel Smiles, the celebrated author of the nineteenth century best-seller *Self-Help* presents the connection accordingly: 'here it may be observed how greatly the character may be strengthened and supported by the cultivation of good habits. Man, it has been said, is a bundle of habits; and habit is second nature' (1958: 365). He continues by noting that 'character consists in little acts, well and honorably performed; daily life being the quarry from which we build it up, and rough-hew the habits which form it' (1958: 366). But while Smiles is quite right to say that character depends upon habits, he inadvertently collapses one into the other such that the complex relation between habit and character is rendered null and void. In fact, for many practitioners of ethological governance, character is distinguished from habit in that it is motivated by something called the 'will', which is what enables one to exercise resolve against temptation. This resolve is fortified by the formation of good habits, so that, when these are used in conjunction with the will, individuals are invested with the capacity for free action and ultimately ethical action. Significantly, the presence or absence of good habits on their own does not ensure the projection of an ethical subject because most habits, irrespective of whether they are good or bad, usually lack any 'moral or ethical significance for the actor' in and of themselves (Campbell 1996: 161). It is only when habits become organized in relation to a normative scale that distinguishes 'good' from 'bad' that they come to reflect sometimes opposing, but usually shared claims about the kinds of dispositions that constitute the good person or the good life.[3] As Mariana Valverde puts it, the emphasis

on good habits in this context presupposes that 'doing things in a certain way repeatedly and routinely, until that way of doing things becomes "second nature", eventually creates a positive desire for the very activities and schedules we were forced to follow' as children and adults (1996: 362). As an everyday ethical practice then, habits constitute a series of fragmented, but eminently repeatable actions that create the conditions for self-government.

The perceived centrality of the 'will' to the development of good habits and the cultivation of character for effective ethological governance is evident in the range of popular, spiritual and scientific material published in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Bain 1861; Kellogg 1905; Marden 1899; Northrop 1896; Sharp 1917; Sisson 1910; Wright 1881). At birth, a baby was believed to be susceptible to certain determining influences on her character, craven or otherwise, but could devote herself to the project of self-improvement over her life course. As such, intensive effort was focused on creating the conditions for the cultivation of moral habits that would serve as the foundation for character development. But, as the philosopher John MacCunn (1846–1929) cautions (1900: 47–50), an undue focus on habit formation at the expense of character could pave the way for potentially undesirable consequences. By itself, habit was viewed as 'a double-edged instrument' that could not resist the temptation of vice. Because habits were not in themselves inherently moral, an excessive attention to habit could either 'easily end up producing the rigid and wooden type that is unequal to the demands of life', or it could produce an individual susceptible to vice. This was because habit bore no direct relation to the will. As such, MacCunn believed that both the cognitive faculties required for advanced problem-solving and the adaptive qualities necessary for meeting new demands and challenges were decidedly absent if an emphasis on habit prevailed without due attention to character. In other words, habits could never provide a sufficient proxy for character because they were not equipped with the means to render judgement. So, while good habits were necessary in order to temper the influence of temptations that might potentially 'enslave the will', in the words of psychologist William McDougall, '[h]abits should be our servants, not our masters; they are good servants and bad masters. The man who becomes a creature of habit, no matter how good his habits, is a poor creature' (1927: 72).

One of the clearest statements of this view is found in Reverend Gillet's *Education for Character* (1914) where he declares the will to be 'the *highest* and *most perfect* form of human activity, of self-conscious activity. . . .Will, in a word then, is the power to act *deliberately*' (1914: 2, emphasis in original). For Gillet, the will offered the means by which habits could be cultivated through disciplined repetition in order to 'reproduce analogous acts with ease and satisfaction' (ibid.: 122–3), acts that would be 'disciplined, organized and unified' according to prevailing social ideals (ibid.: 4, 30). Character was formed by the will and consequently served to regulate conduct motivated

by the passions, which could be potentially dangerous if they encouraged one to act in immoral ways. One was said to possess character therefore when 'by sheer force of will, he has succeeded in massing together his scattered energies as into a living sheat [*sic*], in disposing them according to the ideal imposed on him as a man, and a Christian' (ibid.: 16–17). Character symbolized the attentive exercise of one's cognitive faculties in order to cultivate the self-knowledge and self-domination necessary for moral conduct (ibid.: 30). Will and character in this view were symbiotically connected. Not only did character depend upon the will, but in order for the will to be exercised effectively, it depended on character to encourage the growth of 'healthy' habits that, in turn, would serve to strengthen the resolve of the will. This circularity notwithstanding, moral habits were perceived to be an essential means to counteract 'the natural weakness of our active faculties' (ibid.: 126). In other words, moral habits not only produced but also reinforced one's character, and ultimately staved off the temptation to fall prey to one's passions. For Gillet, the possibility that temptation might undermine one's character is ever-present: 'Beneath every moral action, as beneath every forest leaf, there may be concealed a reptile: that we have escaped its fangs for twenty years is no sure guarantee that we shall do so in the future. So, there is not an instant in our lives, however habit may flourish, when the conscience is not bound to remain on the alert' (ibid.: 129).

For ethological governance then, the generative potential of character for guiding everyday ethical practice rests with the extent to which character offers the means to discriminate between morally right and morally wrong conduct. As functionally derivative of character, the presence of the 'will' and an established foundation of good habits generate the dispositions necessary for the responsible exercise of freedom. Dispositions then are a consequence of sustained habitual activity. In other words, one or two lies does not contribute to making one dishonest, but if one lies repeatedly as a matter of 'habit', then this suggests that one might be dishonest as a matter of 'character'. It is through the cumulative total of this chain of repetitions that the establishment of good habits creates the conditions for the will to exercise effective judgement and cognitive capacity, and thus to constitute character. What is important to remember is that habits, independent of whether they are good or bad, become the visible means by which one can assess character and, thus, reveal the level of self-knowledge and self-domination exhibited by the individual. Habits are particularly revealing in that they both reflect one's passions and reaffirm one's resolve against temptation. Of course, the tension between one's already formed habits and the exercise of the will presents itself when one seeks to modify established habits.[4] If one is successful, one begins a slow process of developing counter-habits and routines in order to reinforce the will, and also to reflect changes in the moral expression of one's character.[5]

John Stuart Mill and the science of character formation

One of the best examples of a philosophical defence of ethological governance comes from John Stuart Mill (1806–73). Yet, having said this, it is a defence that is riven by a lack of clarity and some degree of tentativeness. Many know Mill by means of his *Autobiography* where he presents the details of his extraordinary education; still others know him principally through his participation in the 1830s as a leading representative of the society named the 'Philosophical Radicals', or by his intellectual reputation as the author of works such as *A System of Logic* (1843) and *The Principles of Political Economy* (1848). While he is perhaps he is best known by his works *On Liberty* (1859), *Utilitarianism* (1861) and *The Subjection of Women* (1869), it is in Mill's *Logic* that he offers a first glimpse of his version of ethology as a science of character formation in an ambitious attempt to interrogate scientific methods and their applicability to social as well as natural phenomena. In an explicit attempt to undermine the phrenological underpinnings of prevailing ethological discussion, he locates his 'new' science of ethology between psychology (preoccupied with the discovery of the universal laws of mind in order to discover how one thinks) and sociology (concerned with the question of how humans act) (Mill 1974 [1843]: 458). Mill intended his version of ethology to be a science that would examine how circumstances mould and shape individuals, nations and races, one that would offer a non-corporeal alternative to the study of character. He hoped that in his hands ethology could be used to identity those particular social conditions that were constitutive of the dispositions of specific character types. It would ultimately serve as a normative project that could offer insights into the conditions of possibility for the development of a form of character appropriate for liberal sensibilities.

What makes Mill an especially good example of ethological governance is the complex way he weaves a commitment to liberal principles of freedom and a concern for self-improvement together with an emphasis on character formation. It is in this respect that Mill is particularly vulnerable to having 'representative status' thrust upon him, not simply for his apparent commitment to ethology, but also for his rehabilitation in the twentieth century as a *liberal* philosopher *par excellence*. That Mill is often recognized for his work *On Liberty* rather than his work on ethology suggests the presence of a filtering mechanism that governs his corpus and excludes his less popular works. In the first instance it would be a mistake to portray Mill as *the* author of ethology because doing so not only presumes that ethology occupies a unitary discursive field, but also because it would require one to establish a secure connection between ethology and Mill's larger corpus. This is made more difficult given that the historical record reveals that Mill's ambition to develop a science of character formation was never fully realized.[6] While it generated a mild degree of enthusiasm upon its initial publication, the *Logic* has continued to receive minimal attention from subsequent English-speaking generations.[7]

Furthermore, as Stefan Collini (1991: 68) remarks, J. S. Mill stands at a somewhat oblique angle to the so-called 'Victorian' English culture of the nineteenth century. What contemporary commentators often neglect is that his celebration of individuality was intended as a form of protest against the rigid and ossifying constraints he associated with 'custom' and 'public opinion' (Collini 1991: 324). He was a critic of many treasured traditions of nineteenth-century public life, and purposely isolated himself from the conventional pressures of Victorian 'society'. Although he was a well-respected, if sometimes annoying, thorn in the side of many of his critics, John Stuart Mill's rehabilitation in the twentieth century as *the* pre-eminent theorist of liberty is particularly interesting in light of his relatively ambiguous status throughout the nineteenth century (Collini 1991: 332). So, even though Mill was evidently committed to the project of cultivating a science of character formation, to make him a representative of that tradition would demand that his work on ethology be seamlessly reconciled with his other more well-known work, a task that is foolhardy, if not impossible. The prospect of dredging up his long-forgotten discussion of ethology seemingly challenges an already accepted system of classification that affirms John Stuart Mill's status as a singular referent – the Author – of liberalism. The challenge for us is to perhaps accept Mill as an author of multiple discourses, rather than to perceive the figure of 'John Stuart Mill, the Author' as a functional principle that might be used to limit and exclude different aspects of his work from consideration.

My hope is to sidestep these issues by considering Mill's work on ethology as a diagnosis of the present, to see it as symptomatic of a general orientation towards a liberal ethological governance in the mid- to late nineteenth century that celebrated the generative possibility of character. Indeed, if the scientific study of character formation could help to identify the circumstances that give rise to a particular kind of character, it would then be possible to transform the conditions of existence in order to reform a 'lesser' character: it would allow for greater precision in influencing the direction of policy at home and abroad if one were able to isolate the antecedent circumstances giving rise to a particular conception of character. From this perspective, the political consequences of such a science could be enormously fruitful for colonial endeavours seeking to 'improve' so-called less-civilized peoples, not to mention populations of indigent, 'degenerate' and others less fortunate.

In the *Logic*, Mill argues that the scientific study of character is possible given that character is produced by a system of empirical laws that are susceptible to observation and verification. He gives no explicit definition of character, although we can reasonably assume that his understanding of character is consistent with the common usage at the time: character is the ensemble of attributes and properties of an individual or group that can be used to distinguish each and all from one another (Carlisle 1991: 2). Although ethology was not a predictive science, it could be used to indicate broader tendencies that Mill believed were generally constitutive of different types of characters. And so, even though Mill construes ethology as an 'exacting'

science that reflects universal laws at work, he acknowledges that it is nonetheless an imperfect one that can generate only hypothetical 'tendencies' rather than statements of empirical fact (1974 [1843]: 457). He maintains that it is nonetheless possible to deduce an individual's character from their life circumstances. In these terms then, Mill allows for the existence of a casual, or better non-causal, link between a person's circumstances and their character. This does not mean, however, that character can ultimately be determined – such a move would obviate the individual's responsibility and capacity for self-improvement. Of central importance, then, is the role of one's interiority in producing and ultimately exercising one's freedom. Mill insists that 'our actions follow from our characters' where our circumstances 'made us what they did make us, by willing not the end but the requisite means; and we, when our habits are not too inveterate, can by similarly willing the requisite means, make ourselves different' (ibid.: 440–1).

As a science of character formation, ethology was intended to explain the practical and concrete applications of the general laws of the mind developed by psychology. It aimed to derive middle principles from the general laws of psychology; and, while not predictive, Mill hoped that it would eventually become possible to ascertain the likely outcomes or effects of the antecedent circumstances that were generative of a specific form of character (ibid.: 462–3). While it was hoped that ethology would generate principles that could contribute to the examination of an individual's character, Mill argued that its central contribution was its ability to gauge the causes generative of 'the type of character belonging to a people or to an age' by means of a particular subset of ethological investigation termed 'political ethology' (ibid.: 500). The science of political ethology represented the most important element of sociological investigation, for it could reveal the circumstances that produced the opinions, feelings and habits associated with a particular group in addition to the constitutive effects of character for shaping the government of society (ibid.: 501).

So, even though Mill does not give much if any attention to ethology after its initial mention in the *Logic,* his work on ethology provides an important discursive link between techniques of character formation and the desire for self-improvement that is suggestive of broader tendencies within liberal rationalities of power.[8] Again, although this understanding of ethology is not 'new' at the level of thought, it is consistent with a system of ethological governance that attempts to harness the potential of character formation as a tool for social and political transformation. That this ethological motif appears in Mill's other writings offers further evidence of a general preoccupation with the generative capacity of character for liberal rationalities of rule.

Mill's assessment of the transformative potential of ethology is particularly evident in *The Subjection of Women* (1869) where he defends the principle of formal equality between the sexes. His argument hinges on the extent to which it is possible to determine women's 'natural' character and, consequently, the 'natural' relation between the sexes. Indeed, what prevents an analysis of this

natural state is that social circumstances of the nineteenth century have produced an 'artificial' character where women have been encouraged to be pleasing toward men:

> All the moralities tell them that it is the duty of women, and all the current sentimentalities that it is their nature, to live for others; to make complete abnegation of themselves, and to have no life but in their affections. And by their affections are meant only the ones they are allowed to have – those to the men with whom they are connected, or to the children who constitute an additional and indefeasible tie between them and a man.
>
> (Mill 1977c [1869]: 271–2)

Even though women's extant character may limit their 'fitness' as full citizens, Mill argues that society's inability to see this as temporary can be attributed to an inadequate understanding of the processes of character formation: 'Of all the difficulties which impede the progress of thought, and the formation of well-grounded opinions on life and social arrangements, the greatest now is the unspeakable ignorance and inattention of mankind in respect the influences which form human character' (ibid.: 277). Because 'it cannot now be known how much of the existing mental differences between men and women is natural, and artificial', it is virtually impossible to know what women's character might be under different circumstances (ibid.: 277, 313). And so, while Mill maintains that women should not be denied full rights of citizenship as a matter of principle, until their characters are modified such that they can display an appropriate 'understanding' of social and political life, the implication is that they are as yet unfit for citizenship. If it could be determined what kind of circumstances produced character that was oriented towards understanding rather than sentiment, then 'it would be possible to challenge the way their characters are formed', and, thus, the 'proper cultivation of women's character' could conceivably result in more egalitarian social conditions (ibid.: 324). It is in this regard that the potential for ethology to be used in the service of reforming current social conditions appears. For, if women were trained 'properly' in the arts of understanding (as opposed to sentiment), then they would presumably exhibit dispositions that would make them competent as full and equal citizens. In principle, ethology's potential for reform extends not only to women but also to the lower classes, perceived 'degenerates', colonial subjects and aboriginals who exhibit an inferior character through want of appropriate training and education. Interestingly, the difference between English women and colonial subjects is that women's natural character is obscured by the artifice of Victorian society, whereas the character of colonized peoples can claim no such conceit for it ostensibly develops under 'natural' circumstances. In claiming that English women have an immediate potential for ethological governance that does not extend to colonized peoples, Mill inadvertently reveals a civilizational bias that belies an apparently neutral, and hence scientific, approach to the study of character.

Mill's commitment to ethological governance is further evidenced by the explicit connection he makes between liberty and character in *On Liberty* (1859). Here, he maintains that societies organized by the principle of liberty can produce subjects with an active and vibrant character that exhibit human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference' (1977b [1859]: 262). From the perspective of ethological governance what is significant about his conception of character is that it is 'exercised only in making a choice. He who does anything because it is the custom, makes no choice. He gains no practice either in discerning or in desiring what is best' (ibid.: 262). The kind of character appropriate for representative democracy in Mill's view is one that expresses different preferences, ideas and beliefs 'within the limits imposed by the rights and interests of others' (ibid.: 266). This is an ideal of character that celebrates individuality, one that prepares the conditions for the individual to become more 'valuable to himself and is therefore capable of being more valuable to others' (ibid.: 266). Indeed, societies organized by custom and tradition will inevitably produce a conformist type of character that is 'inert and torpid' that will tend to stifle views that may be unusual, unorthodox or simply counter to those held by the majority. Such constraints on freedom are also the problem of despotic governments that produce barbarous people who do not exhibit a sufficient capacity for self-government (ibid.: 272). At fault is the authoritarian abuse of power, a fault that can be partially ameliorated by good laws and solid constitutions. But what is necessary in order to ensure the health of democracy is the presence of citizens who are capable of articulating different points of view. And for those authoritarian societies that may be moving towards liberty, Mill suggests that despotism may be a necessary, albeit, interim form of government that will cultivate citizens who do not languish under the guise of custom. But once having escaped the bonds of custom he suggests that it is 'no longer necessary for one to be sovereign over others' (ibid.: 224). Here, the presence or absence of character gauges the excesses and limits of governmental power. On one hand, the presence of particular dispositions that facilitate the expression of one's individuality is used as the principal criterion for the exercise of freedom and, in being so used, works to reinforce that freedom. On the other hand, the absence of particular dispositions helps to legitimate greater governmental control under the guise of greater social 'improvement' and 'reform'. Character, in other words, serves as a standard of government that indexes the judicious deployment of governmental power.

Mill develops this ethological theme further in *On Representative Government* (1861) where he argues that strong character grounded in liberty is necessary in order for representative government to thrive. What distinguishes representative democracy from despotism is the fear that despotism cultivates obedience and passivity as measured by the insufficient exercise of 'the individual faculties, moral, intellectual and active, of the people' (1977a [1861]:

436). In representative democracy, alternatively, citizens are encouraged to develop their mental and moral faculties in ways that allegedly benefit themselves and others. In other words, the citizen 'is called upon, while so engaged, to weigh interests not his own; to be guided, in case of conflicting claims, by another rule than his private partialities; to apply, at every turn, principles and maxims which have for their reason of existence the common good' (ibid.: 436). Even so, Mill worries that this form of representative government may suffer because some people may be unwilling or unable to fulfil its conditions 'from indolence, carelessness, or cowardice, or want of public spirit' (ibid.: 377). Indeed, those who have not been trained appropriately may display 'passions too violent, or personal pride too exacting to forgo private conflict', thereby limiting the effectiveness of government. It is in this context that Mill argues that so-called 'civilized governments' might be required to be despotic on those occasions when a people cannot exercise control over themselves, and must therefore impose a degree of 'forcible restraint upon their actions' in order 'to lead them to the path of liberty and character' (ibid.: 377). And so we see clearly the paternalism of ethological governance at work.

In sum, Mill gives us a useful account of ethological governance that helps us to see how liberal government through the nineteenth and early twentieth century depended on character as a test of citizenly competence. In part, it shows how the right to demand rights depends on the capacity for individuals and groups to demonstrate their character through effective self-government. Indeed, the idea that character serves as a specifically liberal norm that carves out exceptions partially addresses how colonial subjects, aboriginals and women have been denied rights at different historical moments because they have demonstrated either insufficient or unsuitable character for public life. Moreover, it helps to explain how struggles for recognition have often been preoccupied with demonstrating character in order to be deemed capable of self-government and, thus, worthy of citizenship. Second, the concept of ethological governance shows how the liberal government of the self and others depends on a developmental understanding of human conduct that seeks to render human action calculable and predictable at the same time as it mobilizes the 'will' as a mechanism for practising freedom through the exercise of character. Last, Mill's version of ethological governance also helps us to see how character operates as a normative index that gauges the judicious deployment of governmental power. From a liberal rationality of government, evidence of depravity, vice, idleness and dependence can be perceived not simply as a lack of character, but also as proof that government has governed 'too little'. On the other hand, evidence of social conformity, over-regulation and constraints on liberty reveals the stifling of 'liberal' character, and is also indicative of a government that governs 'too much'.

What is particularly distinctive about ethological governance is that it establishes an ethos of rule that in its devotion to self-improvement is motivated by a fear of stagnation (Collini 1991: 109). Calculability

notwithstanding, this is a form of governance that derives its strength from an ethos that is committed to the goal of self-transformation. Indeed, it is a conception of human agency that is driven by what one might call an *ethological imagination* that generates the ethical qualities of character as a condition for moral authority. In seeking continually to envisage new possibilities for transformation, this is an imaginary that consists of new ways of seeing and being that enable one to surpass the present in order to anticipate the future (Marcuse 1968: 154). As such it operates at two principal levels: first, it is organized by a system of meaning such as civilization or progress through which specific subjects come to be authorized as citizens and where others are constituted as social problems or ignored altogether; and, second, it operates at the level of the self by conditioning the ways that the subject of 'character' comes to interpret possibilities for action and comes to express one's freedom.

In the first instance, in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, for example, ethological governance established a context of rule where individual character was superimposed onto a broader conception of national character, essentially an 'English' character (Baucom 1999; Hall 2002). Here, the category of Englishness did not operate as a racial category but actively configured relations to oneself and others.[9] It designated a cultural identity that was distinct from the political identity marked by British sovereignty, and contributed to those struggles to define, defend and reform 'Englishness' as part of a liberal, indeed an ethological, ethos.[10] Second, the ethological imagination confronts the exceptions carved out by systems of ethological governance and engenders new possibilities and techniques for improvement and reform. However, significantly, in the process of their self-transformation, these erstwhile 'exceptions' also imagine and work to transfix established relations of rule. As Laura Ann Stoler has remarked, the so-called 'civilizing missions' of the nineteenth century were directed at a reform not simply of those 'others', that is the targets of colonial rule, but also of the rulers themselves (Stoler 1994: 109). For English colonizers, ethological governance often turned on the assumption that it was in the domestic realm rather than the public sphere that the dispositions of character (e.g. manliness, chastity and purity) could be formed and unformed (Stoler 1994: 108).

What might we then infer about the fate of ethological governance given the precipitous increase in the focus on character in present debate and discussion? It may be said that a concern for character, and consequently ethological governance, has never really left us. As Foucault has remarked, pronouncements on the 'return' of anything are both dangerous and impudent, for such things have usually persisted albeit beneath the surface of social life. What is interesting about the resurgence of projects devoted to character formation is that it serves as evidence of a government that has governed 'too little'. The attention to the formation of character and good habits is necessarily oriented towards establishing the dispositions necessary

for the subsequent relaxation of government, a relaxation that is directed towards creating the conditions for a more responsible exercise of freedom and a more ethical self. Indeed, the generative potential of character for an ethical 'way of life' inevitably depends on one's ability to distinguish morally right from wrong conduct, and thus today's character formation projects have their roots in the kind of ethological governance espoused by Mill, for they share a similar liberal concern about the consequences of an over-regulated self for inhibiting the ability to harness character's potential for social and political transformation.

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Notes

1 Most recently, Gilles Deleuze develops a concept of 'ethology' from Spinoza's philosophy. Deleuze's use is different from that expressed here: he uses it to signify the variation in the capacities and powers of an individual essence (mode) in relation to its territories and encounters (Deleuze 1988: 122–30; Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 256–60; see also Gatens 1996; Gatens and Lloyd 1999; Lefebvre 2005).

2 See for instance, the contemporary collection of moral fables compiled by William Bennett in *The Book of Virtues* (1993) and the follow-up publication titled *The Moral Compass* (1995).

3 One might fruitfully say that 'dividing practices' work to distinguish dispositions of honesty from dishonesty, kindness from meanness and independence from dependence. By dividing practices, I mean those practices that produce subjects that are ordered in relation to one another according to standards of differentiation and comparison. They are a form of subjectification that depends on the combined effects of technologies of the self and technologies of power (Foucault 1982: 208). For their part, habits are consigned a status of 'good' or 'bad' only when they are situated in relation to the dividing practices of character that develop over the *longue durée.* Indeed, one's character cannot be assessed in an instant, but can only be observed, measured and evaluated over time.

4 Mariana Valverde's argument in *Diseases of the Will* (1998) is especially useful in this context. She examines so-called 'diseases of the will', such as addiction and alcoholism, through a genealogy of freedom, one that offers a treatment of

eighteenth and nineteenth century discourses on the constitutive relation between habit and the will. One of the advantages of Valverde's analysis is that she situates the problem of 'habit' in relation to an analysis of addiction to explore how so-called 'diseased wills' were targeted by self-help regimes that enabled one to 'kick the habit' (1998: 5).

5 In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the notion of 'moral exercise' emerged as a means of strengthening character, in much the same way that one might lift weights in order to build muscle mass. It served either to strengthen already existing muscles of character, that is to make the 'will' stronger, or to build 'good' character through 'force of habit' where such strength did not exist before. Both depended on the existence of an arsenal of habits to strengthen resolve. Moral exercise was imperative for a masculine or 'muscular morality' that sought to balance the often feminized aspects of moral education. Here, character was associated with a masculine ethos that celebrated physical and moral health in order to cultivate virtues such as stoicism, fortitude and endurance.

6 As Mill's friend and critic Alexander Bain notes, Mill's 'next book. . .was to be on the new science, first sketched in the *Logic*, and there called "ethology". With parental fondness, he cherished this project for a considerable time; regarding it as the foundation and cornerstone of Sociology. . .In fact, it never came to anything; and he seems shortly to have dropped thinking of it' (1882: 82).

7 Although Mill's ethological ideas were not taken up by the British empiricists, they appeared to have gained a great deal of currency in France through the works of Hippolyte Taine and Théodule Ribot (Leary 1982: 157).

8 One might situate Mill's work in relation to another canonical figure in the liberal history of ideas, that is John Locke, who, in James Tully's treatment, reflects a commitment to governing conduct through the formation of mental and physical habits that are organized in relation to a micro-physics of 'pain' (Tully 1993: 223). Here, the continual repetition of mental and physical labour until it becomes pleasurable and part of one's common practice comes to govern conduct, as opposed to following the dictates of custom and education (ibid.: 232).

9 Although Englishness functioned principally as a cultural category, even though 'the English race' was not a common phrase, the idea of an 'Anglo Saxon race' held enormous currency at the time. Thanks to an anonymous reader for pointing this out to me.

10 A particularly fine example is found in the Morant Bay rebellion in 1865 where impoverished peasants on the British island Jamaica petitioned Queen Victoria (1819–1901) for permission to use crown lands for planting. Having been denied their claim, a riot ensued where a number of white British subjects were killed and the courthouse burned. In a controversial move, Jamaica's Governor Edward John Eyre (1815–1901) declared martial law in the hopes of suppressing the rebellion, and proceeded to whip, torture and execute hundreds of West Indians. As several scholars have pointed out, the establishment of a Royal Commission to investigate the abuse – headed initially by Charles Buxton and then by John Stuart Mill – constituted the re-imagining of what it meant to be English; consequently the identity of those beaten under Eyre's regime came to be known as English (Baucom 1999; Hall 2002). As Mill remarks in his *Autobiography*, 'There was much more at stake than only justice to the Negroes, imperative as was that consideration. The question was, whether the British dependencies, and eventually perhaps Great Britain herself, were to be under the government of law, or of military license; whether the lives and persons of British subjects are at the mercy of any two or three officers however raw and inexperienced or reckless or brutal' (1981 [1873]: 281).

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