

John Stuart Mill, Children’s Liberty, and the Unraveling of Autonomy

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Abstract: In *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill famously excluded children and so-called barbarians from his otherwise broad grant of liberty to human beings. While many scholars have analyzed and criticized the barbarian exclusion, little attention has been focused on the denial of liberty to children. This article argues that Mill’s theory of liberty rests on an untenable dividing line between childhood dependence and adult autonomy. The processes of discipline and socialization to which children are subject render them incapable as adults of achieving the kind of autonomy that Mill prescribes. Using relational autonomy as an alternative to Mill’s model of autonomy, I propose that we should neither flatly deny liberty to children nor present absolute independence as a normative ideal for adults.

John Stuart Mill famously offers two exceptions to the principle of liberty in his classic work, *On Liberty*. Neither children nor “barbarians” qualify for the broad grant of liberty that other individuals receive. The oft-quoted passage reads:

It is, perhaps, hardly necessary to say that this doctrine is meant to apply only to human beings in the maturity of their faculties. We are not speaking of children, or of young persons below the age which the law may fix as that of manhood or womanhood. Those who are still in a state to require being taken care of by others, must be protected against their own actions as well as against external injury. For the same reason, we may leave out of consideration those backward states of society in which the race itself may be considered as in its nonage.¹

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¹John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*, ed. J. M. Robson (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1963–1991), 18:224. Hereinafter cited parenthetically as OL.

Many scholars, especially political theorists, have addressed the latter exclusion, exposing not only the tensions and contradictions that it creates for Mill's own theory, but also the uncomfortable relationship between liberalism and imperialism that it exemplifies.² Yet comparatively little sustained analysis has been devoted to Mill's exclusion of children.³ This reflects a widespread intuition that Mill is obviously and transparently right about children. While thinkers from more radical traditions of political thought have sometimes challenged conventional, paternalistic views of children, liberal thinkers have by and large followed Mill's lead and rather peremptorily dismissed the idea of children's liberty.⁴ Accordingly, John Rawls did not consider it necessary to offer any extended theoretical account of the "lesser liberty" of children in his classic work, *A Theory of Justice*. He simply deemed it "an [adjustment] to the natural features of the human situation" and spent no more time on the issue.⁵ Similarly, Amy Gutmann instantly disposes of the question whether paternalistic interference in children's lives is warranted, in order to examine what she considers the more theoretically significant challenge of identifying *in whom* the power of paternalistic interference should be vested. She announces, without argument, that "it would be absurd to apply a principle of equal freedom to children."⁶ Though William Galston thinks very carefully and systematically about the scope of parental control over children, he begins by simply accepting as a starting point that "unlike adults, children are presumed not to be able to exercise certain

²See, for example, Duncan Bell, "John Stuart Mill on Colonies," *Political Theory* 38, no. 1 (2010): 34–64; Beate Jahn, "Barbarian Thoughts: Imperialism in the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill," *Review of International Studies* 31 (2005): 599–618; Uday Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire: A Study in Nineteenth-Century British Liberal Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Bhikhu Parekh, "Liberalism and Colonialism: A Critique of Locke and Mill," in *The Decolonization of Imagination: Culture, Knowledge and Power*, ed. Jan Pieterse and Bhikhu Parekh (London: Zed Books, 1995), 81–98; Jennifer Pitts, *A Turn to Empire: The Rise of Imperial Liberalism in Britain and France* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006); Mark Tunick, "Tolerant Imperialism: John Stuart Mill's Defense of British Rule in India," *Review of Politics* 68 (2006): 586–611.

³Rare exceptions include John Kleinig, "Mill, Children, and Rights," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 8, no. 1 (1976): 1–16 and Don Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), chap. 5.

⁴For examples of radical defenses of children's liberty, see Shulamith Firestone, *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1970), chap. 4, and John Holt, *Escape from Childhood: The Needs and Rights of Children* (Boston: Dutton, 1974).

⁵John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice*, rev. ed. (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 215.

⁶Amy Gutmann, "Children, Paternalism, and Education: A Liberal Argument," *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 9, no. 4 (1980): 338.

kinds of agency without direction."⁷ These thinkers echo Mill in taking for granted the obviousness of children's exclusion from liberty.

I argue that we need to pay much closer attention to the category of children in *On Liberty*, and by extension, in attempts to theorize the meaning, scope, and limits of human liberty. My aim is neither to refute Mill, Rawls, Gutmann, and Galston, nor to provide a defense of equal children's liberty. Rather, I argue that Mill's exclusion of children in fact reveals significant weaknesses and lacunae in Mill's theory of *adult* liberty. Specifically, Mill describes liberty as a particular species of autonomy: not merely self-rule, but an even more dramatic form of rule by the authentic self. The authentic self, in turn, is identified with the self that remains true to its genuine nature. This conception of autonomy as authentic self-rule relies upon an untenable division between childhood as a period of relationality and socialization and adulthood as a period of independence and individuality that cannot be sustained. To the extent that contemporary theorists of autonomy explicitly or implicitly presuppose a similar authenticity requirement, they find themselves in the same bind. Rather than simply jettison liberty-as-autonomy, however, I argue that contemporary feminist conceptions of autonomy as relational provide a way out of this bind and thus point to a more plausible conception of the complex tripartite relationship between childhood, adulthood, and liberty. Furthermore, a close reading of Mill reveals that at times he actually foreshadows this feminist conception of relational autonomy, especially when he writes about childhood education, but all too often retreats to the more problematic conception of autonomy as authentic self-rule when he writes of adults. Hence, Mill's theory of liberty is caught between two contradictory poles. This paper seeks to recover the traces of relational autonomy in Mill's own work by emphasizing the continuity rather than the break between childhood and adulthood. Relational autonomy, rather than authentic self-rule, provides the basis for a reworked and more plausible account of liberty.

The paper proceeds in three sections. The first section elaborates Mill's theory of liberty as autonomy. It refutes accounts of Millian liberty as purely negative, and argues that Mill conceives of autonomy in a recursive manner whereby both the immediate decisions of the self, and the self itself, must be self-generated. In the next section, I show that Mill repeatedly depicts the ideal adult subject throughout *On Liberty* as one who has effectively transcended his or her formative years. Whereas Mill underscores how social relations with other human beings, particularly teachers and parents, potentially contribute to the growing autonomy of children, his discussions of adults tend to emphasize the threat to autonomy posed by sociality and valorize independence instead. This implies that the age of majority

⁷William Galston, "Parents, Government, and Children: Authority over Education in a Pluralist Liberal Democracy," *Law & Ethics of Human Rights* 5, no. 2 (2011): 286.

should ideally function as a second birth, in which the subject severs his/her ties to the paternalistic relationships and institutions of his/her youth, emerging as a fully autonomous, independent, and responsible subject. Yet this second birth can only be achieved in a fantastical sense. In reality, the subject who wakes up on his/her eighteenth birthday (assuming eighteen is the age of majority) is the same subject, shaped by the same processes of paternalistic socialization and discipline, as on the previous day. In the final section, then, I rethink the question of children's liberty from the perspective of relational autonomy. I show how relational autonomy allows a reconciliation of socialization and liberty that renders the dividing line between childhood and adulthood fuzzy. The point is not simply that children deserve more liberty than Mill officially grants them—in fact, it is possible to interpret Mill as granting far more liberty to children than he himself implies in his direct statements on the subject. Rather, I argue that adults are not and never can be “mature” in the way that Mill frequently implies. Happily, we can draw from Mill himself, and particularly his account of education as a lifelong process, to reformulate autonomy as a capacity that develops throughout the course of a human life rather than a definitive achievement of a select few, genuinely “mature” adults. Correspondingly, rather than conceiving of liberty as an all-or-nothing right that is fully granted to adults at one definitive moment, we can instead theorize liberty as a spectrum along which individuals advance as they mature through childhood, adolescence, and eventual adulthood.

Mill's Understanding of Liberty

In his classic essay distinguishing negative from positive liberty, Isaiah Berlin repeatedly uses John Stuart Mill to illustrate the concept of negative liberty.⁸ Many interpreters of Mill have followed Berlin's lead, casting *On Liberty* as perhaps the paradigmatic defense of negative liberty. On the negative view, liberty is simply the absence of external restraint. The source of external restraint can obviously vary, although many liberal theorists focus on the monstrous coercive and violent power of the state as the principal enemy of liberty and seek to curtail it in order to secure a coercion-free space for free thought and action. Breaking from this tradition, Mill warns that “society” too can restrain its members from speaking and acting freely, and that an excessive emphasis on limiting the power of the state leaves untouched the growing threat of social tyranny. Hence, Mill argues that neither the state nor society may restrain an individual's speech or actions except to prevent harm to others. Yet in itself this poses no great obstacle to the conventional interpretation of Mill as a theorist of negative liberty, for it

⁸Isaiah Berlin, “Two Concepts of Liberty,” in *Four Essays on Liberty* (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), 126–28.

simply adds a new source of external restraint, but still maintains external restraint as the antithesis of liberty. The opening lines of *On Liberty* appear at first blush to support this analysis: "The subject of this essay is not the so-called Liberty of the Will... but Civil, or Social Liberty: the nature and limits of the power which can be legitimately exercised by society over the individual" (OL, 217). And Mill's well-known first statement of his thesis also bolsters this view:

The object of this Essay is to assert one very simple principle, as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control, whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties, or the moral coercion of public opinion. That principle is, 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 civilized community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. (OL, 223)

Yet a closer look at Mill's understanding of social tyranny reveals that something more complicated than mere negative liberty is at stake. For the threat posed by society is clearly not one of direct physical restraint. Instead, he casts it as the "tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling" (OL, 220). This social tyranny crushes individuality by censoring opinions, acts, and lifestyles that fail to conform to customary norms. While it rarely inflicts the same degree of physical suffering on human beings as political oppression, in some ways it is even more insidious, for "it leaves fewer means of escape, penetrating much more deeply into the details of life, and enslaving the soul itself" (OL, 220). Mill therefore places liberty of the soul at the heart of his analysis, and we must understand what this means in order to grasp why negative liberty does not entirely capture Mill's understanding of liberty.

The concept of "character" plays a crucial role in Mill's thought, and helps to elucidate the meaning of the liberty of the soul. Mill recognizes that both individuals and social groups, especially but not only nations, have distinct characters. Indeed, in the *Logic*, he devotes an entire chapter to ethology, or the science of the formation of character. He explains: "According to this definition, Ethology is the science which corresponds to the art of education; in the widest sense of the term including the formation of national or collective character as well as individual."⁹ Accordingly, throughout his writings, he emphasizes how individual and group character may be either well formed or malformed. In *Utilitarianism*, for example, he criticizes those men who, "from infirmity of character, make their election for the nearer good, though they know it to be the less valuable."¹⁰ In *The Subjection of Women*, he traces how the socialization of women has produced a meek and

⁹Mill, *A System of Logic, Ratiocinative and Inductive*, in *Collected Works*, 8:869.

¹⁰Mill, *Utilitarianism*, in *Collected Works*, 10:264.

submissive character that perversely appears to justify their continued subordination: "All women are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men: not self-will, and government by self-control, but submission, and yielding to the control of others."¹¹ In his *Autobiography*, he criticizes John Arthur Roebuck for failing to see that poetry and the fine arts "have any value as aids in the formation of character."¹² And in *On Liberty*, as is well known, he attributes Europe's continuing social advancement and progress, in contrast to "stationary" China, to its "remarkable diversity of character and culture" (OL, 274). Character is therefore key to both individual felicity and social advancement.

But what exactly *is* character? Stefan Collini has illuminated how the concept of character had two distinct meanings in Victorian liberal discourse. The first, merely descriptive concept of character referred to "an individual's settled dispositions."¹³ A second usage of the term ventured beyond the merely descriptive to interpret character as an aspirational ideal representing a healthy moral constitution. Mill clearly employs both understandings of character. He uses character simultaneously to describe the unique tastes, dispositions, aspirations, and behavioral tendencies of individuals and social groups, and also to evaluate them, casting aspersions on some and praising others. In *On Liberty*, he displays particular reverence for eccentric, nonconformist characters who keep society in constant motion through their bold experimentation with different styles of thinking and living. Yet there is also a third, entirely individualistic conception of character at work in Mill. In this sense, only some people can even be said to possess a character, whether good or bad: "A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own, has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character" (OL, 264). It is here that character and the liberty of the soul connect to each other. Those who lack character are the very same people whose souls are enslaved.

Though Mill himself does not use the word "autonomy," his third definition of character nonetheless prefigures our contemporary concept of autonomy and places it at the heart of his understanding of liberty. The autonomous individual, in possession of a true character, does not merely lack external restraints on self-regarding actions. He/she also cultivates and pursues those desires and impulses that emerge authentically from his/her own unique nature, rather than allowing "the world, or his own portion of it, to choose his plan of life for him" (OL, 262). Or, as he puts it even more strongly

¹¹Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, in *Collected Works*, 21:271.

¹²Mill, *Autobiography*, in *Collected Works*, 1:155.

¹³Stefan Collini, "The Idea of 'Character' in Victorian Political Thought," *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*, 5th ser., 35 (1983): 33.

in the *Logic*, "power over our own character" is a fundamental element of freedom.¹⁴ Bruce Baum, in an article that also rejects a reading of Mill as a theorist of negative liberty, glosses Mill's understanding of autonomy as "the capacity of persons for self-determination and self-government."¹⁵ Understood in this light, Mill's concerns about the production of women's meek, submissive character in *The Subjection of Women* takes on additional weight. It is not merely the case that women are socialized to have weak characters; rather, the socialization process effectively denies them any character whatsoever, in our third sense of character, thus robbing them of their autonomy. Accordingly, Mill writes that, unlike men, women are denied the opportunity to "freely choose" the direction of their natures:

They [women] have always hitherto been kept, as far regards spontaneous development, in so unnatural a state, that their nature cannot but have been greatly distorted and disguised; and no one can safely pronounce that if women's nature were left to choose its direction as freely as men's, and if no artificial bent were attempted to be given to it except that required by the conditions of human society, and given to both sexes alike, there would be any material difference, or perhaps any difference at all, in the character and capacities which would unfold themselves.¹⁶

One might object that Mill vastly overestimates the capacity of men to freely develop their own characters, creating an untenable opposition between purely autonomous men and culturally enslaved women. Indeed, much contemporary feminist scholarship has worked to expose the fantasy of "human beings as self-made and self-making men."¹⁷ An individual may well conform to the reigning opinions of his/her society, or of his/her peers, without being compelled or virtually brainwashed to do so. It may simply be an easier path to choose, insofar as it paves the way for pleasant social relations and pre-empts the discomfort and isolation that may come from visible nonconformity. Or it may simply be the case that the social hegemony of particular norms, even absent overt attempts to thwart nonconformist thought or behavior, effectively instills those norms into the individual's sense of propriety and forestalls serious reflection on alternative ways of thinking or living. In other words, as Saba Mahmood has provocatively argued, individual

¹⁴Mill, *A System of Logic*, 841.

¹⁵Bruce Baum, "J. S. Mill on Freedom and Power," *Polity* 31, no. 2 (1998): 189.

¹⁶Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 305.

¹⁷Jennifer Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy: Sources, Thoughts and Possibilities," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 1, no. 7 (1989): 8. As the title indicates, Nedelsky does not simply abandon the concept of autonomy, but rather reconceives it in a less individualistic manner. Many feminists have followed suit, developing a concept of "relational autonomy." This concept will become crucial in my own account of the relationship between children and liberty in Mill.

self-understanding and behavior may well emerge from “authoritative discursive traditions whose logic and power far exceeds the consciousness of the subjects they enable.”¹⁸ In fact, Mill clearly recognizes this problem in many other texts. Consider, for example, his disdainful description of most of his contemporaries in *On Liberty*:

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. Not only in what concerns others, but in what concerns only themselves, the individual or the family do not ask themselves—what do I prefer? Or, what would suit my character and disposition? Or, what would allow the best and highest in me to have fair play, and enable it to grow and thrive? They ask themselves, what is suitable to my position? What is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances? Or (worse still) what is usually done by persons of a station and circumstances superior to mine? I do not mean that they choose what is customary in preference to what suits their inclination. It does not occur to them to have any inclination, except for what is customary. (OL, 264–65)

Mill indicts Calvinism as a primary culprit for this sorry state of affairs. From Calvinism, men have adopted a grim view of self-will and fetishized obedience instead. Yet democracy too contributes to man’s unthinking conformity: “And what is a still greater novelty, the mass do not now take their opinions from dignitaries in Church or State, from ostensible leaders, or from books. Their thinking is done for them by men much like themselves, addressing them or speaking in their name, on the spur of the moment, through the newspapers” (OL, 268–69). Clearly, it is not only women who are subject to character-distorting and even character-destroying forces. Rather, a variety of contemporary social forces conspire to thwart individual autonomy.

Furthermore, as Mill conceives autonomy in the preceding passages, it describes a particularly robust and dramatic form of self-rule, one that we might describe as recursive. For it is not sufficient that an individual experience himself or herself weighing options, reflecting, and making choices. Indeed, the individual who asks himself or herself a question such as “What is usually done by persons of my station and pecuniary circumstances?” does engage in a process of conscious reflection. But this is not enough for Mill. Rather, the self who weighs options, reflects, and makes choices must be authentic in the sense that it must have been consciously cultivated from the genuine impulses of that self’s own nature. Hence, in the

¹⁸Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 32. Of course, Mahmood is speaking of women in a specific social, religious, and cultural context: participants in the women’s mosque movement in Egypt. However, her account of the bounded agency of the women effectively captures the threat that even the existence of noncoercive norms may pose to the idea of pure individual autonomy.

above quote, Mill draws a stark contrast between "what concerns others" and what "would suit my character and disposition." He worries that contemporary English opinion views the unique, individual impulses and desires associated with a person's true "character and disposition" as a threat to social well-being: "To a certain extent it is admitted, that our understanding should be our own: but there is not the same willingness to admit that our desires and impulses should be our own likewise; or that to possess impulses of our own, and of any strength, is anything but a peril and a snare" (OL, 263). Mill's denunciation of the "unnatural" development of women, his distinction between other-oriented and self-cultivated preferences, and his insistence that a person's desires and impulses must be "the expression of his own nature" imply the existence of a presocial, authentic self. Further evidence for Mill's belief in a presocial, authentic self comes from his rather bizarre speculations in *The Subjection of Women* regarding the true character and temperament of women and of various "races" of mankind. For example, he writes of women that "the general bent of their talents is towards the practical" and asserts that the French and Italians "are undoubtedly by nature more nervously excitable than the Teutonic races."¹⁹ For Mill, adulthood is the time during which the authentic self will confront the ultimate challenge from social pressure to adhere to customary norms. Either it will continue to rule even as it necessarily interacts with others, resisting their nefarious influence, or it will be fatally distorted and ultimately expunged by the conformist pull of sociality.

Mill underscores the significance of fidelity to one's own nature on several occasions. In one of his most well-known analogies, he proclaims: "Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model... but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing" (OL, 263). Authenticity becomes a prerequisite of autonomy. Not only must the self rule, but the self who rules must be a true self: "If a person possesses any tolerable amount of common sense and experience, his own mode of laying out his existence is the best, not because it is the best in itself, but because it is his own mode" (OL, 270). Hence, every decision that the autonomous individual makes requires a kind of double reflection: first, on one's immediate felt preferences and what sort of action best serves them, and second, on the extent to which those preferences are authentically one's own, or truly represent "his own mode of laying out his existence." The test of authenticity is whether these preferences accurately reflect the individual's "own nature" or "inward forces." Accordingly, I conceive of autonomy in Mill as authentic self-rule rather than merely self-rule.

Mill's valorization of autonomy and his simultaneous recognition of the many challenges to its achievement mark a recurring tension throughout

¹⁹Mill, *The Subjection of Women*, 305, 309.

his writings. Katherine Smits aptly describes this as “a fundamental tension between the Romantic ideals of self-authorship and self-construction of character, and an incipient sociological recognition of the influence of already-existing social circumstances and structures upon character in the descriptive sense.”²⁰ Indeed, Smits underscores the extent to which Mill recognized not only general and broadly applicable threats to autonomous character development but also the marked influence of social class on forming an individual’s character: “Class is for Mill a group whose members share the same social and economic position, and thus similar characters and particular interests.”²¹ Insofar as Mill’s sociological understanding of character grants the influence of noncoercive forms of socialization, his opening distinction in *On Liberty* between “the so-called Liberty of the Will” and “Civil, or Social Liberty” unravels. The will itself must be freely developed in order for an individual to be truly free, and social conformity emerges not only from external restraint but also from a subtle, largely unconscious acceptance of dominant norms within society and particular social classes.

Mill recognizes this dilemma, and offers two possible resolutions. The first is simply to insist that while socialization and culture certainly *influence* character, they do not *determine* it. For one thing, one of the very circumstances that mold an individual’s character is “his own desire to mould it in a particular way.”²² Here, Mill works hard to hold the line on his distinction between a presocial natural self and a thoroughly socialized self. It is the natural self, the *true* self, that aims to mold his or her own character in a particular way, thus subverting the forces of socialization in their pursuit of domination. Relatedly, individuals have the capacity to reflect on, alter, and even reject the norms instilled by their circumstances. Mill’s own *Autobiography* provides the evidence of this, as he recounts how his slow emergence from a mental breakdown allowed him to reflect critically upon his father’s excessive rationalism and Jeremy Bentham’s excessively narrow conception of utility. He explicitly criticizes his father’s education for failing to cultivate the feelings and passions: “My education, I thought, had failed to create these feelings in sufficient strength to resist the dissolving influence of analysis, while the whole course of my intellectual cultivation had made precocious and premature analysis the inveterate habit of my mind.”²³ Mill’s second move is to recognize that the relationship between education and autonomy is complex, and may be either positive or negative. As Bruce Baum explains, Mill emphasizes the role that education may play “in cultivating or stifling people’s capacities for freedom of thought and action.”²⁴ By teaching individuals to

²⁰Katherine Smits, “John Stuart Mill and the Social Construction of Identity,” *History of Political Thought* 25, no. 2 (2004): 302–3.

²¹*Ibid.*, 308.

²²Mill, *A System of Logic*, 840.

²³Mill, *Autobiography*, 143.

²⁴Baum, “J. S. Mill on Freedom and Power,” 203.

think critically, and to value self-will, we can develop their capacity for self-determination. For this reason, he wants the state to ensure not that a citizen believe any particular thing about disputed subjects such as religion and politics, but that he/she "possesses the knowledge requisite to make his conclusions, on any given subject, worth attending to" (OL, 303). In other words, citizens should be able to recount what different religious sects or political ideologies believe, so that they can critically evaluate these beliefs and draw their own informed conclusions. Such citizens have been properly "educated for freedom," in Baum's evocative phrase.²⁵

Yet this entire discussion leaves out a crucial fact. While education is obviously a lifelong process and continues to take place both inside of and outside of officially recognized educational institutions throughout adulthood, it is nonetheless children who are the principal recipients of institutionalized education. Theories of education, educational policy, and would-be educators presume children as the paradigmatic students. Consequently, when Mill invests education with the power to produce autonomous subjects, he means that children who presently lack autonomy and have no intrinsic rights to liberty can be educated in a manner that secures their autonomy upon reaching adulthood. There is something potentially paradoxical about this formulation. Whereas the existence of numerous social relationships and the corresponding pressures for conformity threaten to undermine and even expunge the authentic adult self, especially but by no means exclusively for women, it is precisely the child's social relationships that may pave the way for his/her authentic self-development, provided those relationships take felicitous forms. A positive version of sociality, then, provides children with the weapons they will need to resist a negative and threatening version of sociality later in life. Ultimately, this distinction between positive and negative sociality proves more fundamental to a viable theory of autonomy than a distinction between childhood and adulthood, as both forms of sociality exist in both periods of life. This is not to deny that, given felicitous circumstances and relationships, individuals do become increasingly capable of autonomous action and decision-making as they grow and mature, thus justifying differing levels of liberty for children and adults. Instead, I wish to underscore how the capacity for autonomy is always just that—a *capacity*, that can be well served or ill served by a person's relationships throughout the course of that person's life. In order to elaborate these ideas, I turn to Mill's theory of childhood education, showing how it calls for positive, autonomy-promoting relationships between children and parents or teachers. The final section argues that we can and should recognize the possibility of such relationships in adulthood as well—something that Mill occasionally does in other texts, but too often ignores in *On Liberty*.

²⁵Ibid., 205.

From Childhood to Adulthood

After his initial denial of liberty to children, Mill explicitly mentions children only sparingly throughout the remainder of *On Liberty*. On these occasions, he either reinforces the boundary between not-yet-autonomous children and autonomous adults, or emphasizes the role that childhood education can play in developing character, or does both simultaneously. For example, in affirming Wilhelm von Humboldt's theory of individuality, he writes: "Nobody denies that people should be so taught and trained in youth, as to know and benefit by the ascertained results of human experience. But it is the privilege and proper condition of a human being, arrived at the maturity of his faculties, to use and interpret experience in his own way" (OL, 262). Similarly, speaking of our right to intervene when confronted with an individual about to embark on an exceedingly dangerous activity, he crafts an exception for children and the delirious or otherwise mentally incapacitated from his general rule:

Nevertheless, when there is not a certainty, but only a danger of mischief, no one but the person himself can judge of the sufficiency of the motive which may prompt him to incur the risk: in this case, therefore, (unless he is a child, or delirious, or in some state of excitement or absorption incompatible with the full use of the reflecting faculty) he ought, I conceive, to be only warned of the danger; not forcibly prevented from exposing himself to it. (OL, 294)

Finally, and more frequently quoted, he defends the right of the state to require the education of children: "Is it not almost a self-evident axiom, that the State should require and compel the education, up to a certain standard, of every human being who is born its citizen?" (OL, 301). While Mill actually casts this as a rare circumstance of legitimate coercion into the lives of the parents, it quite obviously also qualifies as legitimate coercion of the child, who may not want to receive the education that the state requires.

As is clear in the example of the individual about to embark on a dangerous activity, Mill justifies the coercion of children by underscoring their underdeveloped reflective and rational capacities. For many commentators on Mill, this is sufficient justification to put the issue to rest. Even for those who recognize that such a sweeping denial of liberty requires some additional attention, Mill is still vindicated in the end, for they argue that Mill would have children coerced *in order to develop their reflective and rational capacities*. For example, John Kleinig argues that Mill does not grant the existing generation "the right to mould the generation to come according to its own preferences."²⁶ Rather, the "desirable end of education" is "individuality [and] self-government, rather than conformity."²⁷ Amy Gutmann similarly concludes

²⁶Kleinig, "Mill, Children, and Rights," 3.

²⁷Ibid.

that "Mill was right to suggest that society can legitimately exercise more power over children than it can over adults" because liberal democratic societies should "insure that [children] are given those goods necessary to making reasoned choices for themselves as adults."²⁸ Wendy Donner, citing Joel Feinberg's well-known principle of a child's right to an open future, argues that children's autonomy should be seen as a right-in-trust: "The child's right to an open future carries with it duties on parents to raise children in ways consistent with autonomous development and duties on the state to protect those rights-in-trust."²⁹ Don Habibi sees parental and state power over children as a means of shielding them from the very social pressures that can rob adults of autonomy: "His theory of liberty is designed to cultivate energetic individuals who are able to overcome stifling social pressures, think for themselves, and develop their potential. The immature are especially susceptible to environmental influences. Children are practically helpless against the manipulative power of social forces."³⁰ These discussions imply a teleological development from unreflective children receiving an education for freedom to self-determining, autonomous adults.

Yet this happy story takes too much for granted, both about the nature of education, and about the students themselves. As we have already seen, in calling for the state to require certain minimal educational benchmarks, Mill does not wish the state to impose specific or parochial viewpoints on children. To this end, he emphasizes the crucial difference between state-mandated education and state-directed education: "The objections which are urged with reason against State education, do not apply to the enforcement of education by the State, but to the State's taking upon itself to direct that education: which is a totally different thing" (OL, 302). State-directed education, Mill warns, would create exactly the kind of homogeneity in character and uniformity of opinion that liberty seeks to counteract: "A general State education is a mere contrivance for moulding people to be exactly like one another. ... In proportion as it is efficient and successful, it establishes a despotism over the mind, leading by natural tendency to one over the body" (OL, 124). Hence, except in extreme cases where parents have simply abdicated their responsibility to educate their children, Mill would leave substantive educational decisions to the parents: "It [the government] might leave to parents to obtain the education where and how they pleased" (OL, 302). Under these circumstances, children would receive

²⁸Gutmann, "Children, Paternalism, and Education," 341.

²⁹Wendy Donner, *The Liberal Self: John Stuart Mill's Moral and Political Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 168. For Feinberg's original argument, see Joel Feinberg, "The Child's Right to an Open Future," in *Ethical Principles for Social Policy*, ed. John Howie (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 97–122.

³⁰Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth*, 165.

many different types of education, thus preserving the kind of social diversity that Mill deems crucial to steady progress.

The trouble for Mill is that his formulation may well secure social diversity, but it does so by leaving autonomy in the lurch. Mill nowhere gives us reason to believe that diverse educational institutions “mould” people any less than a uniform state education. William Galston chides Mill for failing to draw “the obvious connection that a father’s choice may prove just as Procrustean for a child as would the state’s. Instead of a single despotic power there might be a multiplicity of smaller ones.”³¹ For a thinker who identified liberty with autonomy, this prospect should set off alarm bells. If the child’s character is formed by his or her specific educational environment, then surely upon reaching adulthood this formation process does not miraculously dissolve and leave him/her as a blank slate upon which only he/she will write. Indeed, Mill’s previously cited discussion of the problematic education of women implicitly recognizes this problem, as he laments the fact that women “are brought up from the very earliest years in the belief that their ideal of character is the very opposite to that of men”—a formulation that underscores how the childhood education of women fatally stunts their adult character. Of course, we should not overstate the deterministic impact of upbringing and education. Children can and do rebel against, or subtly modify, parental worldviews, and though it may be hard to locate the line in practice, it does make intuitive sense to distinguish influence from overt brainwashing. I follow Galston in making a more modest claim: “As long as families exist, they cannot help shaping children in specific ways. There is bound to be a non-trivial statistical relationship between the religious, ethical, political outlook of parents and those of children.”³² My contention is that Mill’s aspirational ideal of authentic self-rule for adults cannot be reconciled with this long childhood socialization process. To the extent that the adult self is even partially constituted by its long prehistory of childhood socialization, we cannot definitively know that its impulses and desires truly represent its presocial nature.

Furthermore, even if we grant that some carefully designed educational process can indeed prepare children to be fully autonomous adults, we can hardly expect that every child will have access to this ideal process. Mill sketches the outline of such an educational process, at least with regard to religion, in an 1868 letter to Charles Friend:

I do not think that there should be any *authoritative* teaching at all on such subjects. I think parents ought to point out to their children when the children begin to question them, or to make observations of their own, the various opinions on such subjects, & what the parents themselves think the most powerful reasons for & against. Then, if the parents show a

³¹Galston, “Parents, Government, and Children,” 299.

³²Ibid., 287.

strong feeling of the importance of truth, & also of the difficulty of attaining it, it seems to me that young people's minds will be sufficiently prepared to regard popular opinion or the opinions of those about them with respectful tolerance, & may be safely left to form definite conclusions in the course of mature life.³³

Yet Mill is merely offering a recommendation here. In *On Liberty*, he grants to parents powerful rights over the particular substance of their children's education, provided it meets minimal benchmarks. It follows that many children, or perhaps most children, will be raised in specific cultural and religious contexts, and their parents will try not only to cultivate their rational capacities but also to instill in them a particular set of contested values. Parents with strong religious beliefs would be unlikely to follow Mill's educational plan, as it would require them to treat their own most cherished beliefs as a neutral subject matter open to debate and contestation.

According to Mill's own criteria, then, only a select few children can truly achieve his ideal of autonomous adulthood, or authentic self-rule. Those children who have received a perfectly liberal education—e.g., a perfectly neutral one with regard to contested value systems—are ideally suited to make the transition to mature adulthood. But those children who reach the legal age of maturity with a set of values largely adopted from their educational experiences, at the behest of their parents, do not qualify as autonomous under Mill's stringent standards. Even more problematically, we can question Mill's own presumption that the liberal education he has spelled out is truly neutral to begin with, or truly capable of creating the kind of autonomy that Mill desires. The adult who insists upon the obligation to reflect critically on received values, and who consciously questions and problematizes customary beliefs and practices, is also inhabiting a particular mode of life and thought, and foreclosing a number of alternative possibilities, such as joining a strong faith community that deliberately limits external influences. To the degree that he/she learned to value critical reflection through his/her childhood education, then he/she too is a product of that education, not a wholly self-made adult. "The importance of truth" is in fact its own parochial value judgment, not a neutral universal principle. This would not necessarily pose a problem if Mill had not previously set the bar for autonomy so high. But insofar as autonomy for Mill requires authentic self-rule by the true, natural, presocial self, even his ideal liberal education thwarts it, because it aims to mold a particular kind of self for the child, with a particular set of impulses and aspirations—toward critical interrogation of received norms and a desire for truth (rather than, for example, the consolations and pleasures of shared community). Mill's preferred mode of education may well encourage reflection and deliberation on a range of choices, but the degree of coercive and even noncoercive socialization that the process inevitably

³³Mill, letter to Charles Friend, Oct. 29, 1868, in *Collected Works*, 16:1469.

entails nonetheless threatens to obscure or alter preexisting “natural” impulses and desires, such that the self who reflects and deliberates is effectively an other-created self. A particular plan of education may secure a form of self-rule, then, but it is difficult to see how it might secure authentic self-rule.

As Bruce Baum argues, “it is misleading to speak of people being ‘completely free’ with respect to their aims, beliefs, values, characters, and social identities.”³⁴ It is just as misleading to view the aims, beliefs, values, characters, and social identities of secular liberalism in this manner as it is those of devout religious people. This is precisely Baum’s point: “What Mill fails adequately to see is how the practices of freedom that he rightly regards as the logical expressions of the modern ethos of self-determination are rooted in a particular historical and cultural constellation of social and political struggles and innovations.”³⁵ Whereas Baum writes to vindicate a model of free agency that would include submission to customary practices, I wish to undermine the idea that *any* individual can successfully become Mill’s ideal, autonomous adult.

Indeed, though he fails to see the parochial character of liberalism itself, Mill does occasionally waver between great optimism and profound pessimism about the training and upbringing of the rising generation, sometimes in the very same passage. At times, he recognizes that education may fail to produce autonomous adults:

Society has had absolute power over them during all the early portion of their existence: it has had the whole period of childhood and nonage in which to try whether it could make them capable of rational conduct in life. The existing generation is master both of the training and the entire circumstances of the generation to come; it cannot indeed make them perfectly wise and good, because it is itself so lamentably deficient in goodness and wisdom; and its best efforts are not always, in individual cases, its most successful ones; but it is perfectly well able to make the rising generation, as a whole, as good as, and a little better than, itself. If society lets any considerable number of its members grow up mere children, incapable of being acted on by rational consideration of distant motives, society has itself to blame for the consequences. (OL, 282)

This passage is striking for several reasons. First, Mill recognizes the arbitrariness of the age of adulthood by acknowledging some adults may effectively remain “children” despite their age. This acknowledgment unravels the very justification for adult liberty that grounds Mill’s theory, as it depends upon the greater “maturity” of adults. Second, Mill blames society itself for these instances of failed development, of adult children. By failing to educate, or miseducating, its children, society prevents the crucial exit from immaturity

³⁴Baum, “J.S. Mill on Freedom and Power,” 208.

³⁵*Ibid.*, 210.

that ought to mark liberty-bearing subjects. Third and finally, even though adult children have no clear theoretical warrant for their liberty, Mill nevertheless insists that society relinquish its control, in recognition of its own failure. At this moment, his theory of liberty mysteriously flips upside-down. Rather than the capacity for rational reflection grounding a mature liberty, the very lack of this capacity grounds society's necessary abdication of its tutelary role. No longer is the line between childhood and adulthood a line between immaturity and maturity, between those capable of autonomous action and those whose characters have yet to develop. The line now marks an arbitrary moment of surrender, based on the legal fiction of an age of maturity. In other words, the line between childhood and adulthood manufactures and constitutes the very thing it is merely supposed to recognize: the autonomous adult.

Yet this may seem a dangerous argument to make. After all, Mill's contemporaneous conservative critic James Fitzjames Stephen pointed out this contradiction for the express purpose of legitimizing moralistic social and state intervention into the lives of all citizens, specifically including adults.³⁶ And his conclusion has great persuasive force behind it. If we emphasize the fantastical character of the line between childhood and adulthood, but we recognize legitimate forms of intervention into the lives of children, then on what basis can we possibly proscribe this intervention for so-called adults? If Mill's argument for liberty collapses owing to his illusory invocation of unfettered adult autonomy, then are we not left with Fitzjames Stephen's retreat from liberty as a compelling or even a coherent ideal? Do we not open the door to a truly dystopian state invested with the power to determine which extraordinary few members of society have been genuinely "educated for freedom" and which must live forever under the paternalistic care of those few?

These dire consequences need not follow. We might instead reconceive autonomy in a more modest fashion that puts it within reach of both adults and children as an aspirational goal which one never definitively attains but toward which one can consistently move. Rather than following Fitzjames Stephen in extending the conditions of childhood indefinitely into the future, underwriting a permanent paternalism, this more modest account of autonomy allows us to extend the call for liberty, albeit of varying degrees, backwards into childhood, insofar as one's sense of individual identity develops gradually throughout life in the context of relationships with others, and does not simply appear fully formed as the clock strikes midnight on year eighteen. Feminist theories of relational autonomy help to reveal the continuity rather than the break between ostensible childhood submission and adult liberty. Like Mill, these theories also highlight the importance to a meaningful, fulfilling human life of reflective decision-making

³⁶See James Fitzjames Stephen, *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, ed. Stuart D. Warner (Indianapolis, IN: Liberty Fund, 1993).

stemming from an internal process of self-directed deliberation. Unlike Mill, however, they do not insist upon a mythical authentic self that both preexists and ultimately manages to resist social influences. Instead, they recognize what Mill implicitly acknowledges for children as a potentially positive, autonomy-yielding fact but all too often presents simply as autonomy-quashing for adults: that “persons are socially embedded and that agents’ identities are formed within the context of social relationships and shaped by a complex of intersecting social determinants.”³⁷ Let us investigate further the relationship between relational autonomy, children, and adult liberty.

Relational Autonomy, Children, and Adult Liberty

It is important to recognize as a starting point that relational autonomy “does not refer to a single unified conception of autonomy but is rather an umbrella term, designating a range of related perspectives.”³⁸ Theorists of relational autonomy disagree with one another on a variety of questions: whether relationality is constitutive or causal, what type of reflective process is necessary to meet the requirements of an autonomous decision, what social forces should be seen as inevitably thwarting autonomy, and so forth. For my purposes, it is not necessary to resolve these disputes. Instead, my claim is that the underlying commonality between these different theories of relational autonomy—an emphasis on the social embeddedness of the self and its potentially constructive relationship to autonomy—allows us to resolve some of the paradoxes I have highlighted in Mill’s theory of liberty, particularly in his (non-)account of the relationship between childhood and adulthood.

Theories of relational autonomy begin from the premise that we should not automatically deem all processes of socialization potentially threatening to individual autonomy. As Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar note, this viewpoint has led conventional theorists of autonomy to miss “the differences between the kinds of socialization, or aspects of socialization, that promote autonomy and those that impede or undermine it.”³⁹ Notably, in her classic article on relational autonomy, Jennifer Nedelsky points to childrearing as an exemplary model of a form of relationality that promotes rather than thwarts the development of autonomy:

If we ask ourselves what actually enables people to be autonomous, the answer is not isolation, but relationships—with parents, teachers,

³⁷ Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar, “Introduction: Autonomy Refigured,” in *Relational Autonomy: Feminist Perspectives on Autonomy, Agency, and the Social Self*, ed. Catriona Mackenzie and Natalie Stoljar (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 4.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 17.

friends, loved ones—that provide the support and guidance necessary for the development and exercise of autonomy. I think, therefore, that the most promising model, symbol, or metaphor for autonomy is not property, but childrearing. There we have encapsulated the emergence of autonomy through relationship with others. We see that relatedness is not, as our tradition teaches, the antithesis of autonomy, but a literal precondition of autonomy, and interdependence a constant component of autonomy.⁴⁰

In contrast to autonomy-promoting relations, oppressive forms of socialization are those forms of socialization that leave citizens feeling “passive, helpless, and dependent” rather than “competent, effective, able to exercise some control over their lives.”⁴¹ This distinction between autonomy-promoting relations and oppressive forms of socialization holds in both childhood and adulthood. I find Nedelsky’s formulation particularly useful because it underscores the extent to which autonomy as a capacity cannot be separated from autonomy as a feeling. In other words, autonomous individuals must have the lived experience of a self-directed process of reflecting, choosing, and acting on choices. Furthermore, by highlighting childrearing as an exemplary model, Nedelsky points the way to what Holger Baumann identifies as “the temporal scope” of autonomy: “the fact that we have a history and a future, that we develop our identities and emancipate ourselves from others over time.”⁴² The temporal scope of autonomy is precisely what I find lacking in Mill. Instead of a definitive moment of maturity that underwrites the end of dependence and the granting of full liberty, we can instead conceive of liberty as steadily expanding to keep pace with the individual’s more and more firmly established sense of self over time. This is not a policy prescription but rather a loose guideline for how human beings might interact with each other, especially how parents might make choices about the freedom and coercion of their children.

My point is not that Mill completely fails to see the relational aspects of autonomy, or the potential for autonomy to be promoted through sociality itself. Quite the contrary: Mill obviously does see this when he instructs parents to provide their children with information about different religious beliefs and practices so that they may make their own evaluations, rather than to flatly impose their own religious beliefs upon their children. In this instance, Mill is using the nature of the parent-child relationship to cultivate the child’s capacity for autonomous decision-making. Accordingly, Don Habibi argues that we simply misread Mill when we claim that he entirely excluded children from liberty:

⁴⁰Nedelsky, “Reconceiving Autonomy,” 12.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 25.

⁴²Holger Baumann, “Reconsidering Relational Autonomy: Personal Autonomy for Socially Embedded and Temporally Extended Selves,” *Analyse & Kritik* 30 (2008): 448.

Mill's exclusion of children from the domain of liberty should not be construed as a blanket denial. ... Rather, he simply placed the responsibility for each child's development and liberty on the most trustworthy people available. He entrusted parents with the power and discretion to extend freedoms to their offspring. ... Paternalistic interference should be guided by a concern for the welfare of the child. Freedoms that the parent perceives as potentially harmful (e.g. playing in the street) should be restricted, and those that are not harmful are usually best allowed. Freedoms that the parent perceives as growth-promoting should be encouraged.⁴³

I do not disagree with Habibi here. Instead, my point is that Mill's account of children rightly emphasizes the autonomy-promoting possibilities of sociality, even if he overrates the extent to which a liberal education is truly a neutral one, whereas his descriptions of adult liberty typically present the fact of sociality simply as a threat to be overcome. Hence, Mill ends up creating an implausible and unsustainable dividing line between a childhood marked by felicitous social embeddedness and an adulthood marked either by a hard-won independence that refuses the conformist pressures of sociality or a lamentable surrender to sociality and corresponding failure to achieve autonomy. The child's sociality, particularly his/her relationship to his/her parents, potentially guides him/her toward autonomous decision-making, whereas sociality appears as a threat against which adults must struggle unceasingly in order to preserve their autonomy. Instead, we should recognize, as Linda Barclay does, that "in many respects our dependency is *ongoing*. We do not merely acquire autonomy and competency in childhood and then become fully independent. Although the degree and nature of a person's dependency may certainly shift, that dependency never vanishes."⁴⁴ To recognize a human being's ongoing dependency on others throughout one's life is to reject any categorical distinctions between immature human beings unfit for liberty and mature human beings deserving of liberty. Both the liberty interests of children and the ongoing interests of adults in forms of protection and care become important. Certainly, in most cases, we can reasonably expect children to require greater degrees of protection and care, and adults to qualify for a greater degree of liberty. That the law recognizes this by enshrining an inevitably imperfect and arbitrary age of majority does not disable the utility of the legal age of majority. But it does mean we should not see this useful legal fiction as a reflection of a genuine categorical transformation.

Furthermore, an emphasis on the self's persistent social embeddedness requires us to rethink Mill's requirement of authenticity as a condition of autonomy. I have argued that, for Mill, autonomous subjects must constantly

⁴³Habibi, *John Stuart Mill and the Ethic of Human Growth*, 171.

⁴⁴Linda Barclay, "Autonomy and the Social Self," in *Relational Autonomy*, ed. Mackenzie and Stoljar, 58.

measure their immediate inclinations against their "natures" to ensure that these inclinations reflect their true natures rather than socially imposed forms of appropriate conduct and aspirations. The trouble is twofold. First, it is simply Mill's presupposition that each self possesses an identifiable, pre-social nature that is either cultivated (like a tree) or quashed. Meticulously separating out the social from the natural elements of the self is a doomed endeavor, especially once we emphasize the roughly eighteen-year period of discipline and socialization that precedes one's entrance into adult liberty. But this recognition of, at the very least, the inextricable intertwining of the social and the natural, and perhaps even more dramatically the irreducibly social constitution even of what passes as natural, is by now a fairly banal commonplace. The second difficulty is less obvious and more interesting for us. Presumably, the self's "natural" inclinations or "inward forces" would be present from childhood, and thus to the extent that Mill expects childhood education to promote autonomy as authentic self-rule, educators should mold the educational processes to the unique proclivities of each child. But even if it were theoretically possible to isolate a child's "natural" inclinations, dispositions, and tastes, it is by no means clear that educators most effectively promote that child's autonomy merely by seeking to amplify and develop those inclinations, dispositions, and tastes. Quite the contrary: we often experience a feeling akin to liberation and self-discovery in precisely those moments when we transcend our seemingly natural inclinations and develop capacities and tastes that previously felt alien to us. Think, for example, of a schoolboy who initially hates mathematics, finding it both inscrutable and dull, but who over time and owing to the persistent prodding of parents, friends, and teachers develops a previously dormant fascination and facility for numbers and calculation. Without the prodding of others, this fascination may never have emerged, yet it could well alter the course of the child's future life. I take this to be one of the key insights of relational autonomy, particularly when conceived as a diachronic facility, as in Baumann's account.

Let us say that this child grows into an adult who still loves mathematics. Perhaps he has even become a professional mathematician. Is the adult's love of mathematics authentic? Intuitively, it seems odd to say no. The fact that mathematics provides him with a genuine sense of fulfillment, and that he now experiences himself desiring and choosing to pursue a vocation in mathematics, would likely satisfy most people's understandings of authenticity. Mill's understanding, however, poses problems. A great deal hinges on Mill's hedge in our original definition of character: "A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, *as it has been developed and modified by his own culture*—is said to have a character." Is the child's love of mathematics, which blossoms into the adult's love of mathematics, a case in which his nature has simply been developed and modified by his culture (or, in this case, his upbringing), or is it a case in which his nature has been thoroughly subverted by his upbringing, which has

imposed upon him an unnatural and alien love of mathematics? Here, our two problems with Mill's conception of authenticity intersect with each other. For we can never definitively answer this question. We cannot objectively discover whether the child's upbringing merely uncovered some genuine, preexisting, natural love of mathematics or whether it instilled that love very much against the child's natural inclinations—or, perhaps even more likely, the child's "nature" simply contained no definitive inclination toward or against mathematics. And I would submit that a temporal, relational view of autonomy allows us to say that it really doesn't matter. Instead, we can simply accept that virtually all of our tastes, passions, and inclinations emerged in and through relations with others; many of our most crucial such relations took place in childhood; and we can expect that these tastes, passions, and inclinations will continue to be modified or even wholly transformed in and through relations with others in adulthood. What makes them authentic—and thus allows us to describe ourselves as autonomous—is our lived experience of continuously affirming them and deriving a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment from them. And we are most likely to have this experience when the relations through which we developed these inclinations were supportive and respectful, rather than domineering and intimidating.

So what does this tell us, finally, about Mill's ostensible exclusion of children from liberty? Habibi is surely right to suggest that Mill does not truly wish to impose upon children a state of absolute domination in which they have no ability to make and pursue their own choices until their eighteenth birthday. Instead, as he argues, Mill invests parents with the right to determine how much or how little liberty their children shall exercise, and hopes that most of them will do so in a manner that promotes the child's steady development of autonomy over time. However, Habibi fails to investigate Mill's untenable conception of autonomy as authentic self-rule by the true, natural self. Mill's intertwined conceptions of autonomy and authenticity render even the education that Habibi claims that Mill recommends an impediment to the exit from immaturity that would underwrite adult liberty. For the impulses and inclinations of adults can never be definitively traced to their ostensible true natures, and the very idea of a human being's "true nature" as a presocial category should inspire great skepticism. Instead, what warrants a gradual expansion of liberty over time is our developing ability through childhood and adolescence to interrogate and ultimately affirm (or modify) our felt inclinations and desires. The ultimate source of these inclinations and desires matters far less, if at all, than our capacity to take ownership of them.

This reconceptualization of autonomy has the additional advantage of loosening the fetish that too many liberals, Mill included, have made of neutrality in education. We identified two problems with this fetish. First, parents with strong, particularistic religious, cultural, and/or ethical commitments are highly unlikely to offer a neutral education in the sense that Mill wants, or

to see such an education as desirable. Second, even the liberal education that Mill outlines cannot really be described as neutral, since it makes an ethical imperative out of liberalism itself and prioritizes individualism above values such as community belonging and the existential consolations of a strong religious faith. Fortunately, our more modest understanding of autonomy as a genuinely felt affirmation of our inclinations and desires can accommodate both the ostensibly (but not really) neutral education prized by liberals and the particularistic education of a specific culture or religion. The educational process must not cut off the individual's ability to take ownership of her own choices, and to feel that they genuinely serve her understanding of a good life, but this hardly requires absolute neutrality between different value systems. On this account, too, not merely the substantive content of educational teaching but also its manner of delivery is important: lessons taught with love, compassion, sympathy, and respect are more likely to cultivate a capacity for autonomy than lessons imposed by fear and rigid disciplinarianism, insofar as the latter will likely undermine the individual's genuinely felt affirmation of his/her inclinations and choices.

Feminist theorists of relational autonomy sometimes claim to be rescuing the concept of autonomy from liberals. For example, Nedelsky introduces her article with a blanket dismissal of liberal conceptions of autonomy: "Feminism requires a new conception of autonomy. The prevailing conception stands at the core of liberal theory and carries with it the individualism characteristic of liberalism. Such a conception cannot meet the aspirations of feminist theory and is inconsistent with its methodology."⁴⁵ While I obviously find feminist efforts to reconceive autonomy useful and insightful, I would modify Nedelsky's dismissal of liberalism, at least insofar as we may take Mill as a representative figure of liberalism. For Mill clearly recognizes the relational characteristics of autonomy as it is a slowly developing trait throughout childhood. He does not conceive of children as individual, sovereign monads exercising a pure, isolated will. Indeed, it is difficult to imagine that anyone could depict children in such a manner, even the most libertarian thinkers. Instead, the trouble arises when relationality simply becomes a threat to autonomy when Mill describes adults. Now, the sociality that enabled the autonomy of children is painted over with much darker colors, and serves only to undermine the autonomy of adults. Yet even here, in his account of adulthood, traces of relational autonomy persist in some of Mill's writings. Consider, for example, his well-known argument that participation in self-government functions as a kind of education for adults that develops and expands both their intellect and their civic capacity:

He 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

⁴⁵Nedelsky, "Reconceiving Autonomy," 7.

their reason of existence the common good: and he usually finds associated with him in the same work minds more familiarized than his own with these ideas and operations, whose study it will be to supply reasons to his understanding, and stimulation to his feeling for the general interest. He is made to feel himself one of the public, and whatever is for their benefit to be for his benefit.⁴⁶

Mill's account of the educative qualities of public deliberation will be familiar to anyone who has delved into the literature on participatory democracy, yet it is striking in Mill's corpus for its positive portrayal of adult sociality, given the suspicion with which he often depicts such interactions. In this instance, Mill recognizes how the positive potential of relational autonomy endures even in adulthood. We should follow Mill's own lead to rescue him from the bind that he creates for himself in *On Liberty*. By maintaining a relational account of autonomy throughout the course of a human life, we can present a more plausible, if more modest, account of both autonomy and liberty.

⁴⁶Mill, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in *Collected Works*, 19:412.