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Various feminist scholars (Annas, 1977; Okin, 1979; Eisenstein, 1981; Ring, 1985) notice that Mill's *The Subjection of Women* is plagued with ambiguities. On the one hand, Mill forcefully denies that "any one knows or can know, the nature of the two sexes" (CW: XXI, 273). Mill argues his case on female equality by claiming that certainly most, and probably all, differences between men and women are attributed to environmental factors. In this regard, Mill believes that existing experience is unreliable in an argument about women's nature (CW: XXI, 261). On the other hand, many of Mill's arguments rest on the premise that the actual experience of gender is a guide for understanding gender politics. Women could vote and be elected in Parliament because exceptional women were strong leaders in history. Mothers have a "natural" role in raising children, and women may choose traditional gender roles instead of economic independence. Women use cunning and specific gendered strategies to fulfill their needs. Actual families are "schools for despotism" where fathers impose their will on wives and children.

While feminist scholarship generally looks at Mill's ambiguities as confusions or flaws, I suggest that Mill's ambivalence has to be taken at face value by feminist theory.

Many feminists – and particularly liberal feminists- feel that human beings cannot develop their true potential until they would live in a society where men and women have complete equality. One solution to this problem is to abolish gender roles, or to value social and legal norms because they promote gender neutrality. Because actual gender roles are shaped by patriarchy, the elimination of gender roles would open up possibilities for human emancipation. Like Mill, many feminists believe that new relationships grounded in an ideal of equality would be an outcome of dismantling and denaturalizing the idea of masculine and feminine. However, other feminists (Schwartzman, 2006; Pateman and Mills, 2007) feel that gender oppression is pervasive and that ideal theory is not the only good response to women’s oppression. The ideal of gender equality obscures the significance and the strength of women’s subordination. For some feminists, analyses of gender inequality need to engage with actual conditions of power and oppression before designing new gender norms. The tension between representing a gender ideal and describing actual conditions of oppression is critical for feminist theory. I address this tension in my paper by investigating Mill relationship with the idea of gender and argue that Mill represents an important resource for contemporary feminists.

Why is Mill a theoretical resource for contemporary feminism? First, I believe that Mill is a complex thinker with many sides and any attempt to define him exclusively as “liberal” or “radical” overlooks Mill’s complex mind. Mill has many voices, and like late eighteenth-century women novelists (Jane Austen, Mary Wollstonecraft), he is tempted to imagine gender anew, while at the same time remains immersed in prevailing gender ideas. Like Stimpson (Johnson, 1995), I believe that a Mill’s voice is fragmented, and some of the voices are “imprisoning,” some “freeing,” and “some whistling in the

dark” (Johnson, 1995, xi). In contrast with contemporary feminists (Okin, 1979; Mendus, 2000; Nussbaum, 2009), I argue that Mill has different parts and these distinct interests are developed differently in *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women*. Second, I claim that Mill’s ambivalence could offer an important lesson for feminists. Mill wants to imagine better conditions for human development and feels that gender norms restrict human capacities for imagination. Gender norms are an obstacle rather than a resource for a better world. At the same time, norms about masculinity and femininity constitute our historical existence. Mill knows that men and women are located in specific societies, internalize different gender norms, and cannot understand their gender outside their bodies’ presence in the world. Within this approach, being located in one’s gender is rather a resource than an obstacle to imagination. The tension between these two ideas points to an important theoretical potential left unexplored. I intend to fill this gap by suggesting that the work of imagining social equality could begin from understanding the strength of patriarchal norms. Various liberal theorists tend to sidestep the negative features of gender, in an attempt to offer full equality for men and women. Similarly, Mill felt that by abolishing gender norms feminists are working toward realizing an equal society. I challenge this strategy and argue that a thorough analysis of Mill’s relation to gender is a sharper tool for understanding social oppression.

1. Mill and the Gender Ideal

An important component of Mill’s feminism is his notion of ideal gender. Mill’s view of androgyny—or the possibility of “abolishing the distinction between

characters”—forms the foundation for equal relationships between men and women and free development of individuality (Urbinati, 1991). Mill’s ideal of androgyny articulates two distinct ideas. In his view, the segregation of gender is contrary to full human development. The notion that men are rational and speculative, while women are poetic and religious, is strongly refuted by Mill. Androgyny would mean, in this regard, the possibility of de-segregating positive attributes, so that a person would be simultaneously rational and religious, poetic and analytic, assertive and caring. Second, the ideal gender abolishes the distinction between male and female, because the ideal gender selects the best traits from actual masculine and feminine characteristics. The ideal gender is neither masculine, nor feminine, but something different. It defines a human ideal, and it would be developed in a family where both members have equal positions. Mill’s commitment to overcome the artificial distinctions between men and women leads him to imagine a new type of family grounded in the ideal of equality.

Mill’s notion of ideal gender is elaborated in theoretical texts, as well as in letters to his partner and friends. In *The Subjection*, Mill thinks that identity in moral and emotional abilities creates the conditions for equality in marriage. In *On Marriage*, Mill claims that the ideal gender would be different from the actual segregation of sexes.¹ Mill’s articulation of androgyny is more developed in his exchanges with Carlyle and Grote. In a letter to Mill (*The Carlyle Letters Online*, September 24, 1833), Carlyle spoke about a French author, Madame Roland, as “one the clearest, bravest perhaps as you say *best* of her sex and country; tho’ (as indeed her time prescribed) almost rather a man than

¹ “If they [man and woman] are still far from being equal, the hindrance is not now in the difference on physical strength, but in artificial feelings and prejudice” (CW: XXI, 42).

a woman.” For Carlyle, the best woman is almost a man, as the best women can only emulate the masculine ideal. In his reply to Carlyle, Mill says that he does not like Carlyle’s point about Madame Roland as being “rather a man than a woman.” Mill’s argument is that the ideal gender would be articulated beyond actual masculine and feminine traits:

“There was one thing in what you said of Madame Roland which I did not quite like – it was, that she was almost rather a man than a woman: I believe that I quite agree in all that you really meant, but is there really any distinction between the highest masculine and the highest feminine character?” (*CW*: XII, 184).

In the same letter, Mill goes on to argue that differences between actual masculinity and femininity are generated by contemporary structures of society and family life. The segregation between the ideal masculine and the ideal feminine is an outcome of environmental expectations and differences. Mill makes a similar point when he objects to the use of “feminine” and “masculine” by George Grote in his history of Greece. Grote wrote, “It must be confessed that what may be called the feminine attributes of the Greek mind – their religious and poetical vein – here [in Volumes I and II] appear in disproportionate relief, as compared with the masculine capacities – with those powers of acting, organizing, judging, and speculating, which will be revealed in the forthcoming volumes” (Grote in Robson, p.19). In his review of Grote’s book, Mill makes very clear that Grote’s attribution of masculine and feminine features is

conventional. Mill goes on to quote from Rev. Sidney Smith, who argued that there is clear difference between innate and environmental characteristics:

“That there is a difference in the understandings of men and the women we every day meet with, everybody, we suppose, must perceive; but there is none surely which may not be accounted for by the difference of circumstances in which they have been placed, without referring to any conjectural difference of original confirmation of mind. As long as boys and girls run about in the dirt, and trundle hoops together, they are both precisely alike. If you catch-up one-half of these creatures, and train them to a particular set of actions and opinions, and the other half to a perfectly opposite set, of course their understandings will differ, as one or the other sort of occupations has called this or that talent into action.” (Smith in Robson, p.19-20)

In his emphasis on different types of gender socialization, Mill sounds strikingly contemporary. Like many feminists (Young, 2005; Rubin, 2006), Mill feels that “feminine” and “masculine” are a set of structures and conditions that delimit a typical situation lived by women and men. Like Rubin (2006), Mill feels that far from being a product of natural differences, gender identity is the suppression of important similarities. Like Young (2005), Mill knows that gender is passed on through education and social norms. Mill understands that “gender is a socially imposed definition of the sexes”

(Rubin, 2006, p.94).² A set of structures define one's gender, and different conditions of socialization lead to different performances of an action such as playing in the dirt, or "throwing a ball." In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill makes clear that legal and social norms structure gender and hinder human development.

Moreover, in contrast with prominent contemporary liberals, Mill seemed to be highly attuned to the complexities of gender. Because Rawls's (1971) parties behind the veil of ignorance do not know their sex, Okin (1989) forcefully pointed out that Rawls's theory neglects gender and "does not consider whether or in what form the family is a just institution" (p.108). Habermas's discourse ethics suffers from "a gender blindness that occludes the differential social and political status of men and women" (Meehan, 1995, p.7). More troubling, Schwartzman (2006) claimed that contemporary liberal methodology expressed by theorists such as Ronald Dworkin and John Rawls is ill equipped to deal with actual gendered hierarchies of power.

Although Mill is attuned to social inequality, one of his solutions to gender discrimination is to abolish gender roles. In his response to Carlyle, Mill distinguishes between "mechanical" attributes and positive qualities (CW: XIII, 184). Gender comes with features that need to be abandoned, as well as with positive qualities that need to be emulated by men and women alike. Exceptional men and women have combined the best qualities of both genders, and the ideal gender is an outcome of *similar* qualities in men and women. Mill does not imagine a situation where gender differences are completely abolished. He knows that "differences of taste" are an inherent part of human interaction

² In addition to criticizing the sexual division of roles, Rubin analyzes the heterosexual underpinnings of the gender system.

(CW: XXI, 321). Yet he argues that the distinction between a man and a woman, which stem from their gender education, aggravate gender differences.³ Mill wants to abolish primarily the negative features of gender, and leave open the possibility of building humanity by selecting positive virtues. The differences that are an upshot of gender inequality have to be erased.

Like many liberals, Mill wants to leave behind the negative features of gender or sex. Like Rawls, Mill wishes that in a just system the parties to the social contract would not have sex, or rather a system where they would have only better gender characteristics. Like Dworkin, Mill wants that a just system would treat people with equal respect, as long as gender is an outcome of ideal equality.⁴ An important assumption in liberalism is that persons need to be treated equally regardless of their gender. Schwartzman's (2006) astutely points out that, because liberal methodology is focused on each and every individual as individual, liberals have a "difficult time detecting and analyzing cases of oppression" (p.7). Mill, however, unlike Rawls and Dworkin, is more attuned to social oppression. His critique of patriarchal social norms is almost unique in liberalism.⁵ He powerfully notices that educational practices and social norms around marriage hinder women's development (CW, XXI: 98). Yet, he shares with many liberals the desire to

³ "But there is nothing beyond the mark in saying that the distinction in bringing-up immensely aggravates those differences, and renders them wholly inevitable" (CW:XXI, 321).

⁴ See Schwartzman's (2006, pp. 37-55) discussion about the equality of resources in Dworkin's liberal theory.

⁵ See Di Stefano (1991) for this point.

minimize the effects of injustice by sidestepping the negativity of gender. In the search for the ideal gender, Mill's injuries, that is, his own incorporation of hierarchies of sexism, are left unaddressed.

At the same time, Mill's desire to abolish gender is not unique within feminist theory. Jaggar (1983) believes that liberal feminists share the ideal of the androgynous society. Within this ideal, gendered psychological differences would lessen and possibly disappear. Like liberal feminists, Ferguson (1991) believes that "the elimination of sex roles and the development of androgynous human beings is the most rational way" to allow love relations among equals and develop satisfying social relationships between men and women (p.189). Ferguson worries that masculine is associated with "active, independent, aggressive, rational, emotionally controlled," and feminine with "passive, dependent, nonassertive, non-rational, and emotional" (p.189). Because actual conceptions of masculinity and femininity exclude each other, her solution, like Mill's, is to think about ideal gender as "one who is neither masculine, nor feminine, but human" (p.190), which amounts to abolishing the category of gender. Ferguson's normative call is to transcend old categories in an effort to develop denied human potentialities.

Like Mill, various feminists exclusively focus on what positive qualities are better to be distributed in androgynism (Vetterling-Braggin, 1982). The debate in feminist conversations about androgynism is whether we should envision a perfect society as one in which a person has both morally acceptable masculine and feminine traits (monoandrogynism), or one in which a person has a more complex range of choices ([A] a combination of "masculine" and "feminine" [B] only acceptable "masculine" traits [C] only acceptable "feminine" traits (Vetterling-Braggin, 1982, pp.151-156). The gist of the

argument about androgynism is about the selection of a better ideal in terms of choices. The exclusive focus on choices, however, overlooks the importance of deep gendered characteristics. The feminist ideal explores positive qualities without adequately understanding the role and significance of oppression in people's lives.

I worry that many feminists follow the path of liberal theorists and tend to de-contextualize gender by focusing on ideal choices and possibilities. I believe that injuries generated by patriarchal norms are *only* taken into account by a thorough investigation of their effects. Our conceptual radar is better adjusted to trace oppression by localizing it in its historical context. The idealized conception of the androgyne points to an important tendency in feminism and liberalism to discount "the negativity" of gender. A focus on exploring Mill's ambivalent relationship with gender, however, challenges feminist and liberal efforts to use strong gender idealizations.

2. Mill's Complex Understanding of Gender

Mill's conception of ideal gender is not Mill's only notion of gender. Mill dreamed about a society where gender would not rigidly separate between women and men's qualities. He wanted a society where families would re-invent the notion of equality, and claimed that unequal power in married couples hinders moral development. However, Mill felt that women have the role to civilize their husbands (CW: XXI, 322). He felt that men's sexuality has to be controlled, because "the wife is in every sense the victim of the man's animal instinct" (CW: XXIX, "Letter to Henry Green"). He also felt that women would work out of the market only out of economic necessity; that unpaid

domestic labor was different from, and preferable to, wage labor; and that it is natural that some women should depend on her husband's wage. He also felt that working class women are just victims of men's desires, without any sense of agency, and believed that child rearing is only an intolerable burden for them (CW: II, 13). Mill's effort to show alternatives for achieving gender equality is plagued by important tensions. He struggles with the role of agency in women's life. He struggles with understanding how actual relationships lived under non-ideal circumstances lead to gender equality.

Feminist scholars interpreting Mill generally do not address Mill's struggles, tensions and complex relationship with gender norms. He is either identified as a liberal who applies his principles to women's subordination (Okin, 1979), a feminist liberal (Nussbaum, 2009), or a radical feminist (Mendus, 2000). However, Mill is a very complex thinker who has different parts, and speaks with different feminist voices. An either/or approach to Mill's feminism disavows his struggles to articulate gender equality. In this respect, in their interpretation of Mill, Nussbaum and Mendus focus on particular passages in Mill's work to show he is either a strong critic or a supporter of difference feminism. To make Mill only an opponent of gender essentialism (like Nussbaum wants) or only a critic of the reason-emotion dichotomy (as Mendus does) distorts the many voices with whom Mill speaks to us.

In the *Subjection*, Mill challenges two important patriarchal attitudes toward women. First, he struggles very hard to criticize a prevailing argument at the time that women were inferior to men. Mill spends a lot of time to criticize this argument. In *Subjection*, he attacked this view as "idolatry ...and the most pernicious of the false worships of the present day" (CW, XXI, p.261). Mill knew what he was up against,

because he knows that his opinions are against the general feeling in England: “I consent that established custom, and the general feeling, should be deemed conclusive against me...” (CW, XXI, p.262). Second, Mill understands that the other side of overt mysogynism is the subtle idealization of women. As Reeves (2007, pp.418-419) argues, the pervasive opinion in the Victorian England was that the ideal women should be “angels in the house,” that is, loving, submissive and devoted. A part of Mill knows that declaring women morally better than men is another side of keeping them subordinated. He believes that declaring them better than men is an “empty compliment” (CW, XXI, p.309). If women are morally better, and if they commit less crimes than men, and if they seldom “fall under the penal law,” that is a consequence of being under the control of their masters (CW, XXI, p.309). In other words, a part of Mill is aware that statements about the virtuous nature of women hide women’s subordinated role:

“I do now know a more signal instance of the blindness with which the world, including the herd of studious men, ignore and pass over all the influences of social circumstances, than their silly depreciation of the intellectual, and silly panegyrics on the moral, nature of women” (CW, XXI, p.310).

Because Mill is aware of the subtle idealization of women, Nussbaum is right to argue that Mill formulates an important critique to any claims about women’s moral superiority (2010, p.139). For Nussbaum (2009), Mill is a strong critic of difference feminism, because he claims that women’s nature is constructed under conditions of

oppression.⁶ In Nussbaum's view, Mill is not a "difference feminist," because Mill is skeptical about the moral nature of women, as opposed to that of men's. Nussbaum uses Mill to argue that Gilligan's work on women's voices is deeply defective. To an important extent, I agree with Nussbaum that a part of Mill would have resisted the claim that women's reasoning gives us reliable information about how women actually are. Like Claudia Card (1996), Mill asks the fundamental question about women's nature under patriarchy. He seems to believe that, in patriarchies, whereas the responsibilities of personal and informal relationships are assigned to women, those associated with formal and public relationships are distributed to men (CW, XXI: 317). For Mill, women's overinvolvement in the private sphere is an effect of social power, and comes with exercising control in men's lives.⁷ Women's virtues such as love and care are partly constituted by sexist practices, and cannot be idealized as providing a form of unadulterated resistance to patriarchy. Against the uncritical idealization of women's virtues, Mill, along with Nussbaum and Card, powerfully point out that women's morality is already transformed by inequality.

However, Mill is not just a critic of difference feminists, as Nussbaum sees him.

⁶ In *The Subjection*, Mill is very clear about women's oppression "What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing—the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others (CW: XXI: 273).

⁷ "Women are schooled into suppressing them [natural feelings] in their most natural and most healthy direction, but the internal principle remains, in a different outward form. An active and energetic mind, if denied liberty, will seek for power: refused to command of itself, it will assert its personality by attempting to control others" (Mill, CW: XXI: 324).

Mill argues like a difference feminist in important passages of *The Subjection*, and arguments anticipate important insights within radical feminism. Like Gilligan (1993), he strongly points out that women need to define themselves, and criticizes male biases in reports about women's nature. In Mill's view, the claim that men understand women's nature is wrong, because even men who are closer and affectionate to their wives live under unequal conditions. As a result, "even with true affection, authority on the one side and subordination on the other prevent perfect confidence" (CW, XXI: 275). Mill formulates important qualifications about "understanding women": understanding a woman does not mean understanding any other woman; understanding a woman would not mean understanding women in all cultures and historical times; and more importantly, understanding women is "wretchedly imperfect and superficial, and always will be so," until women voices are going to speak up for themselves (CW, XXI: 275). He claims that the question about women's nature "rests with women themselves—to be decided by their own experience, and by the use of their own faculties" (CW, XXI: 276). In her research on women's voices, Carol Gilligan's (1993) goal was to "expand the understanding of human development by using the group left out in the construction of theory to call attention to what is missing in its account" (p.4). Like the difference feminist, a part of Mill believes in the *Subjection* that women have to speak with their own voices, because their voices might tell a different story than the story men tell about them.

In contrast with Nussbaum, Susan Mendus (2000) notices that Mill's insights are close to contemporary radical feminism (or difference feminism, in Nussbaum's terminology). Radical feminists "are proud of women's culture of emotion, intuition,

love, personal relationships, at the most essential human characteristics” (Jaggar, 1983, p.97). They emphasize the importance of feelings and personal relationships, and believe that “women’s ways of understanding the world contrast with ‘patriarchal’ ways of knowing” (Jaggar, 1983, p. 96). The important step that radical feminists take is “to challenge the woman-hating values of patriarchy by turning them on their head” (p.97). Therefore, radical feminists “glorify women precisely for the same reasons that men have scorned and sometimes feared them; in doing so, they give special value to women’s reproductive functions and to the psychological characteristics that have distinguished women and men” (p.97). In *Subjection*, Mill argues that women are better than men at particular tasks. For instance, they are better caretakers and have a better insight than men in reading people’s character (CW, XXI, p.296). Mendus’ point is that Mill is a radical feminist because the *Subjection*, by attributing qualities such as emotion and intuition to women, it does so by undermining classical rationalist theories about the superiority of reason. As such, Mill advocates the re-evaluation of ‘male’ values of reason and logic. Annas’s quick rejection of Mill’s glorification of women’s qualities has to be revisited.

Yet, Mill’s voices that anticipate sophisticated arguments within contemporary feminism are also voices that internalized patriarchal assumptions. For instance, Mill sometimes works with a clear-cut distinction between arguments that are based on feelings and arguments that draw on both reason and feeling. In *The Subjection* Mill criticizes conventional opinions because they rest *solely* on feelings, and are harder to uproot than reasoned opinions. Mill felt that only people who use both feeling and reasons could address his feminist arguments.⁸ The problem with this argument is that it

⁸ “So long as an opinion is strongly rooted in the feelings, it gains rather than loses in

presupposes a strict epistemic hierarchy between feeling and reason. In a clear hierarchy, reason is superior to emotion and controls its content. In this respect, Mill does not argue against people who base their opinions *solely* on reasons. Feelings are to be indicted, when one fails to persuade those who oppose women's rights. This passage is not singular in his work. Mill often distinguishes between instincts and reason, where reason is the dominant capacity to guide either feelings or instincts (see letter to Lord Amberly, CW, XXVII, 1693). More importantly, with regard to sexuality, he thinks that the ideal sexual activity is entirely governed by reason. Mill's clear-cut distinction between feelings/instincts and reason is sometimes challenged by his own enthusiasm about the power of feelings. Yet, reason and feelings seem to be to him two distinct capacities. Interestingly, while Nussbaum (2001) criticizes the view that emotions "are blind forces that have no selectivity or intelligence about them" (p.11), she refrains from making the argument against Mill. However, Mill's rejection of claims resting solely on feelings suggests that some emotions are blind forces without rationality.

Mill's voices are multiple and correspond to different parts of his self. The assumption that that Mill is only a difference feminist or only a strong critic of women's distinct qualities ignores the complexity of Mill's self. I believe that Mill is not just the

stability by having a preponderating weight of the argument against it. For if it were accepted as a result of argument, the refutation of the argument might shake the solidity of the conviction; but when *it rests solely on feeling*, the worse it fares in argumentative contest, the more persuaded its adherents are that their feeling must have some deeper ground, which the arguments do not reach" (CW, XXI: 260).

hero who brilliantly anticipates powerful arguments made by liberal, difference and queer theorists (Nussbaum, 2009). Mill has important internal conflicts. Different sides of him are articulated in different contexts. While Mill suggests that the ideal of androgyny is a solution to gender discrimination, he also thinks that women have better qualities in particular contexts. Mill believes that women's qualities are articulated within, and constituted by, oppressive circumstances. While he praises the power of emotions, he sometime uses a strict hierarchy between reason and emotion. In this hierarchy, emotions are inferior and lead to conventional views on women. By paying attention to Mill's incorporation of patriarchal norms, I challenge a powerful narrative in Mill scholarship focusing on his genius and overlooking his struggles and conflicts.

3. Mill between Liberal and Feminist Selves

Because Mill has different parts that are contextualized in different contexts, the self in *On Liberty* is different from the self in *The Subjection of Women*. An important difference in articulating the human self rests upon whether Mill's theorizes the self as presupposing a genderless individual or a gendered self. While Mill's ideas conceive a genderless individual in *On Liberty*, I argue that he articulates a more socially constructed relational self in *The Subjection of Women*. In addition, whereas the self in *On Liberty* is an outcome of drawing boundaries between the individual and society, the self in *The Subjection of Women* is thoroughly constituted by social norms.

Two conceptions of human self part company in regard to how the self is constructed. Like Jaggar (1983), I believe that a liberal feminist understanding of the self

is different in important ways from a radical feminist understanding of human nature. On the one hand, if the self is rather seen as in need of differentiation from society, then the focus of liberal theory is upon the boundaries between an individual self and social norms. Liberal theorists stress the value of individual autonomy, that is, they value individual judgment, uncoerced by socially corrupted norms. They worry about the state's intervention in the life of individuals and distinguish between public and private. For liberals, while the public is defined by the aspects of life that may be legitimately be regulated by the state, the private is the territory where the state has no rights for intervention. On the other hand, if the self is seen as being thoroughly constituted by social norms, then the focus of radical feminism is upon the relationships between the individual self and gender norms. Radical feminists stress the pervasiveness of sexism, and seek to delineate structures of domination. They worry that patriarchal norms affect the life of individuals and believe that every area of life is the sphere of sexual politics. They challenge the assumption that private activities such as childrearing, housework, emotions and marriage are not subject for political analysis and intervention.

Both selves –or aspects of the human self-- emerge as contextual responses to specific historical questions. Liberals are traditionally interested in limiting the power of the state and articulated specific interventions to protect individuals. Radical feminists are interested in analyzing the strength of patriarchal norms and believe that any aspect of human life is involved in power dynamics. Mill's sides in *On Liberty* and *The Subjection of Women* show how different aspects of the self become relevant according to different questions. However, the two selves –or parts of the selves- are in tension in important respects.

Mill's understanding of individuality in *On Liberty* is strikingly genderless, and close to a liberal tradition of the self. In *On Liberty*, Mill's intention is to draw clear boundaries between the individual and the society, because he worries that public opinion has a stifling effect over the development of individuality. He attacks the mid-Victorian conception of respectability, as well as the tyranny of the majority. Mill's harm principle asserts that we may coerce others only for the sake of self-defense. His principle would "govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control" (CW: XIII, 236). Mill's intention, therefore, is to claim a clear line of demarcation between the private and the public, which would offer individuals better conditions to realize their potential. Mill wants to protect the capacity for spontaneity, originality and innovation. He is less concerned with coercion by single individuals and more with restraining coercive actions of groups (Ryan, 1998). His fear is not that we are going to assault or incarcerate eccentric individuals, but that social groups exercise powerful pressure to tyrannize those who think and act differently. Mill is heavily invested in protecting the moral value of individuality.

Like Mill, Rawls believes in the inviolability of the individual (Ryan, 1998). In *Political Liberalism*, Rawls (1996) does not want a society imposing comprehensive doctrines on individuals. His liberal ideal is a society that would establish norms drawing on a plurality of different comprehensive doctrines. The value of individual conscience is critical in order to achieve just norms, and different social arrangements need to accommodate it. Unlike Mill, Rawls's conception of political liberalism does not want to *cultivate* values such as autonomy and individuality. Yet, Mill and Rawls share a deep concern about the boundaries between the public and the private. The notion of public in

Rawls's demarcates different type of constraints and rationality than those applied to the private sphere. Ideas such as public reason, public justifications and public goods refer to activities that are regulated by mutual cooperation and just norms. In his discussion of gender and political liberalism, Rawls, like Mill in *On Liberty*, is concerned primarily with the intervention of the state into the affairs of the individual. Rawls (1999) believes that there is no private sphere as a space exempt from justice (p.599). However, because Rawls (1999) does not want to regulate different arrangements between different people, his theory allows for "some traditional gendered division of labor within families" provided that is voluntary and does not lead to injustice (p.600). In his desire to protect a space that would respect human conscience, Rawls allows for gender inequality on the basis of the voluntary agreement.⁹ Private sphere is a space that would legitimately demarcate a voluntary withdrawal from the full applications of justice as fairness.

Like Mill, Berlin emphasized strongly the value of individual protection from the interference of others, or what he calls "negative liberty." For Berlin (1970), the idea of negative liberty is at the core of what Locke, Mill, Constant and Tocqueville advocated. Liberal thinkers believed that the individual need protection from unjust coercion. The minimum area of personal freedom is needed not to "degrade or deny our nature" (Berlin, 1990). Like Mill and Rawls, Berlin believes that, if various individuals attempt to deprive some others of a minimum degree of freedom, they need to be restrained, by force if necessary. Privacy becomes for liberal thinkers a necessary refuge against the violence of individuals, groups and the state. Because the self within liberal theory opposes unjust

⁹ If gender inequality is inherently unjust, one may wonder how gender inequality would not lead to injustice.

norms, the self is conceptualized to a large extent as being outside social norms. The liberal self, like Mill's genius, is "more individual than any other people"; it is less capable of fitting into society's moulds; it feels that it has to evade the shackles of convention. The liberal self is mostly genderless, and builds on an idealized version of masculinity.¹⁰ As such, the liberal self is an effort towards separation and differentiation from social norms. Resistance to unjust coercion by forging individuality becomes a fundamental structure of the liberal self.

In *The Subjection of Women*, Mill's is not primarily interested in the separation of individuals from social norms, but in the effect of legal and social norms upon women. He does not want to draw boundaries between the individual and society, but to investigate the effects of patriarchal norms, as well as alternative solutions to oppression. For Mill, it is critical that his audience understands the domination of the male sex for perceiving the subjection of women. His subject is not a genderless individuality, but women and men socialized according with oppressive norms. In *On Liberty*, Mill gloriously celebrates the autonomy of the liberal self:

"He who lets the world, or his own portion of it, choose his plan of life for him, has no need of any other faculty than the ape-like one of imitation. He who chooses his plan for himself, employs all his faculties. He must use observation to see, reasoning and judgment to foresee, activity to gather materials for decision, discrimination to decide, and when he has decided,

¹⁰ For the critique of the genderless subject in feminist responses to liberalism, see Benhabib (1992).

firmness and self-control to hold his deliberate decision.” (CW: XIII, 267)

In contrast, Mill in *The Subjection of Women* knows that the subjection of women to men is a universal custom. He knows that men do not want “solely the obedience of women, they want their sentiments”. He knows that “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”. A darker understanding of the subject replaces the glorious picture of the liberal autonomous self:

“Every one of the subjects lives under the very eye, and almost, it may be said, in the hands, of one of the masters –in closer intimacy with him than with any of her fellow-subjects; with no means of combining against him, no power of even locally overmastering him, and on the other hand, with the strongest motives for seeking his favour and avoiding to give him offence.” (Rossi, p.136)

Like Nussbaum (2009), I believe that Mill anticipates to an important extent Foucault’s critique of the tyranny of the normal. For Mill, the power of patriarchal norms is deeply ingrained in the structure of the human self. Like Foucault, Mill thinks that because the tyranny of the custom is seen as universal, then any departure from it is considered unnatural. Like Foucault, Mill explains that our notion of natural are socially constructed and if to his contemporaries the notion that women could be soldiers or members of the Parliament is unnatural, in the feudal ages “war and politics were not thought unnatural to

women.” Mill’s project in *The Subjection of Women* is to de-naturalize gender differences that are considered a-historical, universal and not subject to contestation. The self in *The Subjection of Women* is close to the radical feminist self by powerfully rethinking the private sphere, marriage, and gendered natural characteristics.

Conclusion:

Mill’s understanding of the self in *The Subjection of Women* takes the strength of social norms at face value. Yet tensions between the liberal aspiration toward genderless relationships and the actual oppression of women are a central part of Mill’s argument. He feels that one cannot know the difference between sexes, because they have “only been seen in their present relation to one another.” Mill believes, like many liberal feminists, that the actual relationships between men and women are useless for understanding the ideal gender. He dreams that in a society where women would not be under the control of men, we might know about the mental and moral differences that “are inherent in their nature.” Mill also believes, like many radical feminists, that women who act differently can disrupt the conditions of actual oppression (*CW*: XXI, 278). He understands that women need to be active publicly and have the right to vote in order to achieve a more equal status in society. The gap between the full equality of gender and gradual reforms points to two different ideal types of the self. In the liberal ideal a genderless system would achieve complete equality, whereas in the radical feminist ideal oppression is an inherent part of realizing equality.

Similarly, Mill’s attitude towards equality in relationships is torn between

theorizing an ideal marriage and acknowledging oppression. Like liberal feminists, Mill wants the family to become a school of justice, where “sympathy, tenderness, and loving forgetfulness of self” prevail (*CW*: XXI, 283). The ideal marriage requires “two persons of cultivated faculties, identical in opinions and purposes, between whom there exist that best kind of equality, similarity in powers and capacities with reciprocal superiority in them” (*CW*: XXI, 323). He believes that he realized this ideal in his relationship with Harriet Taylor. However, like radical feminists, he also knows the unequal and often violent relationships that unfold in actual families. Under conditions of oppression, family becomes a school for despotism. A school for despotism is “a school of willfulness, overbearingness, unbounded self-indulgence, and a double-dyed and idealized selfishness, of which sacrifice itself is only a particular form” (*CW*: XXI, 289). For Mill, men’s behavior is shaped by oppressive power, because they harm especially those who do not have power to withstand it. Similarly, women’s responses to tyranny take a counter-tyrannical shape, and in the search for self-protection, women use their weapons to reinforce oppression (*CW*: XXI, 284).

What are Mill’s lessons for contemporary feminism? On the one hand, I believe that liberal feminists would need to learn from radical feminists that gender negativity is an important part of our selves. Mill was an advanced feminist thinker for his time, and yet he endorsed important traditional ideas about women. One cannot leave aside the negativity of gender roles, because it offers important insights into social oppression. The desire to abolish gender roles has to take into account our social position in the world. On the other hand, radical feminists would gain from the liberals’ impetus towards more equality. An analysis of gender is not sufficient if it would see actual power positions and

gender norms as being fixed. The idea of equality is important in thinking how gender negativity might be addressed.

The tension between a genderless ideal and gender oppression represents in many ways a fruitful tension. Because one needs to imagine a better future, a society where gender stereotypes would be less salient is a desirable society. Equally, a society where schools of despotism are replaced by schools of equality is an attractive ideal. Yet, Mill is not aware of the tension between the two projects. The conflict between gender ideal and gender oppression is Mill's blindspot. I worry that in the search for an ideal gender, actual conditions of oppression are overlooked and considered insignificant. By focusing on the positivity of diminishing gender differences, liberals- and liberal feminists- tend to forget the value of differences and their role in understanding oppression.

One way of moving further feminist thinking is to reject the strong dichotomy between gender ideal and conditions of oppression. Mill was unaware that this dichotomy strongly underpins his thinking. The relationship between imagining better gender relations and oppression is complex and does not involve a clear-cut opposition. Mill believed that privileged couples could escape oppression. However, if oppression is an inherent part of our gender constitution, then projects of imagining a gender ideal need to address our participation in the social world. Mill's parts, which are labeled today as liberal feminist and radical feminist, seek a better conversation in order to become less irreconcilable. Like Mill, we might need the work of integration so we would not split our material embodiment from the desire to act better in the world. Mill was an exceptional feminist. Yet his struggles and conflicts are important for understanding the

difficult process of theorizing social equality. Instead of abolishing gender norms, a focus on how gender is internalized and works within Mill's work shows the difficult path toward realizing gender equality.

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