

## **Employing a hierarchical conception of the self in *On Liberty***

John Stuart Mill's principle of liberty is unambiguous about the grounds of the legitimate use of coercion. He makes clear that to prevent harm to others is the only reason why one, or the state, may interfere with "liberty of action". Chapter Four, however, is where Mill describes a range of self-regarding character types, some which may "rightly" incur "severe penalties". Displaying "lowness or deprivation of taste" renders the individual "necessarily and properly the subject of distaste, or, in extreme cases, even of contempt". Mill is clear that society is to play a substantial role in the shaping of individual character, but to what extent does this influence clash with the one very simple principle? To resolve this tension, and several others, the paper employs a hierarchical conception of the self to show that the principle of liberty protects first-order decision making and action-taking (character), but that higher-order reasoning *about* the first order desires and actions can (and should) be influenced by society, social elites in particular, thereby challenging any notion of autonomy in Mill's thinking. The paper does not ascribe this interpretation to Mill, but merely offers it as one example of what a consistent reading of *On Liberty* looks like.

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