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Ringmar, Erik

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117  
221 00 Lund  
+46 46-222 00 00

# The Problem of the Modern Self: Imitation, Will Power and the Politics of Character

*Erik Ringmar*

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## Abstract

The problem of the modern self is the problem of how to provide a self for oneself in a modern society characterized by uncertainty and risk. Confronting this challenge at the turn of the twentieth century, many city-dwellers fell ill with afflictions of the nerves, of which neurasthenia was the most common. Neurasthenia could be cured, the sufferers were advised, if they only learned how to strengthen their will and how to assert themselves. Violence, exercised both against oneself and against others, was integral to this project of self-assertion. In a modern society which was becoming ever more peaceful, the rhetoric of violence was ever more enticing, yet such a society is unlikely to be at peace with itself. As a way to avoid this impasse, we need to think again about the notion of "character".

**Keywords:** Modernity, subjectivity, imitation, personality, will power, character, violence, Gabriel Tarde, Théodule Ribot, John Dewey.

## Introduction

Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European societies were quickly transformed by processes of industrialization and urbanization. Life in the city was inherently insecure and your value as a human being was bound up with the price — of your labor, of your investments — set by economic markets. Meanwhile, the traditional safety nets that provided social and psychological security in agricultural society were ripped apart and people increasingly took refuge in crowds. The new city dwellers were members of the legions of workers employed in the new factories; they were parts of the mobs thronging the streets in political riots and in national celebrations; and of the audiences gathering at football matches, bicycle races and other sporting events. People in modern society were free to become whatever they wanted to be, but they never knew what to do with their freedom. Confused and uncertain of themselves, they ended up imitating each other. This is the problem of the modern self. Societies we call modern have created conditions that have made the autonomous human subject — the "modern self" — possible, but autonomy denotes an absence of determination and, as such, has no positive content. In modern society, people do not know who to be.

A hundred years later, the problem of the modern self is still with us. Arguably, it has recently become more acute. In the first part of the twenty-first century, economic markets are reasserting themselves and the safety nets that were put in place in the course of the twentieth century — notably those associated with the welfare state — are looking increasingly frayed. Economic markets are once again subjecting us to their power. We, too, are members of crowds, although today's crowds tend to assemble in virtual reality rather than in the streets; we, too, are passive and weak-willed, and we suffer from afflictions such as "depression" and "chronic fatigue syndrome". In response, we are

constantly admonished to take charge of ourselves: to control our weight by means of diets and our muscles by means of physical exercise. And we are admonished to take charge of our minds too: “mindfulness” is a buzzword which, in a couple of decades, has moved from being an esoteric Buddhist practices to every bookshop’s shelf of self-help books. By controlling our bodies and our minds, we, too, believe we can control our lives.

The aim of this article is to investigate the historical connection between modern society and the modern self. What interests us in particular is the connection to violence. Although cases of actual violence have become increasingly rare in modern society, there is an increasing fascination with the topic. It was violence, many argued in the decades before the First World War, that was going to help people strengthen their wills and assert their personalities, and those who could not exercise violence in person could do so vicariously — by reading about it in books. Today, cases of actual violence are rarer still, but we remain endlessly fascinated by its vicarious expression in books, movies and computer games. Death, indiscriminately administered by a superhero, makes us feel good about ourselves, and the more exposed we are to the vagaries of economic markets, the more urgent the demand for such stories. This was how a fascination with violence was inscribed into the dreams dreamed in modern society. In modern society, physical violence is the ultimate transgression and therefore the most effective way to exercise our will and to assert ourselves. Through fantasies of violence, or through its actual exercise, we can regain control over ourselves and our lives.

There is a problem here, we will argue. A society in which people exercise violence over themselves through assorted disciplinary practices, and constantly dream about exercising violence over others, is unlikely to be at peace with itself or with the world. Somehow or another we must find a way of solving the problem of the modern self without recourse to the rhetoric of violence. In conclusion, a few suggestions will be given for how this could be done, focusing on the notion of “character”.

### **Imitation and the crowd as refuge**

In the last couple of decades of the nineteenth century, industrial production — production in factories by machines — profoundly changed the nature of consumption. Suddenly, endless series of things were produced where every item was identical to the next, without an original to which they all referred. Machine-produced items were perfectly turned out and smooth, and they showed no sign of the carpenter’s chisel or the tailor’s needle. Conservative critics and many radicals complained of the creation of a “machine mind” — ‘a mind which finds satisfaction in purely mechanical qualities, in geometrically regular form, in smooth finish, in perfect repetition’. (Freeman 1921, 183) But people at large were generally delighted with the quality of the things made available to them in this way and, above all, delighted with their price. (Orvell 1989, 40–50; cf. Schwartz 2013) Suddenly it was possible to acquire goods which previously had been beyond the reach of everyone except the well-heeled members of the upper class. And the fact that the items all were the same was a selling point rather than a drawback. To the extent that you are what you buy, you could now buy yourself an identity — on mail-order, why not? — which was identical to that of everyone else. (Orvell 1989, 43–47)

Modern society was a mass society, a society of the crowd, where people were buying the same products but also doing the same things, thinking the same thoughts and dreaming the same dreams. Or so, at least, it seemed to the members of the educated middle class. Only one person remained in the end: the universal human being, Everyman, the unknown soldier. Yet, to many, their presence in the crowd presented a solution rather than a problem. Walt Whitman, in his poetry, captured the thrill of submitting oneself to the presence of others. To him, to lose one's self in the crowd was more than anything to be relieved of a great burden. (Ziff 1984, 579–91; Borch 2013, 128–131)

The armies of those I love engirth me and I engirth them,  
They will not let me off till I go with them, respond to them,  
And discorrupt them, and charge them full with the charge of the soul. ...  
Such-like I love—I loosen myself, pass freely, am at the mother's breast with the  
little child,  
Swim with the swimmers, wrestle with wrestlers, march in line with the firemen,  
and pause, listen, count.  
(Whitman 1881, 82–88)

It was during the last decades of the nineteenth century that sociologists became interested in imitation. Walter Bagehot, writing in 1873, commented extensively on the propensity of human beings in modern society to imitate each other. Financial markets, he noted, are 'mainly composed of grave people' who take themselves exceedingly seriously, yet the conclusions they reach before they make their investments are nevertheless "as imitative as any belief."

If you examine the reasons for the activity, or for the inactivity, or for the change, you will hardly be able to trace them at all, and, as far as you can trace them, they are of little force. In fact, these opinions were not formed by reason, but by mimicry. (Bagehot 1873, 94–95)

Imitation happens all the time, Bagehot concluded, it is largely unconscious, and when we fail to do it properly we are usually profoundly embarrassed. (Bagehot 1873, 90–93) "To conform to the fashion of Rome — whatever the fashion may be, and whatever Rome we may for the time be at — is among the most obvious needs of human nature." (Bagehot 1873, 96) Imitation is 'the main force which molds and fashions men in society as we now see it'. (Bagehot 1873, 97)

It was the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde who first developed a full-fledged theory of imitation. (Tarde 1895; Tarde 1903; cf. Wydra 2011, 93–111; Szokolczai and Thomassen 2011, 43–62) Tarde's work was widely read and commented on at the time, not least in North America. Imitation, he said, is 'action at a distance of one mind upon another', and thereby similar to photographic reproduction. (Tarde 1903, xiv) 'By imitation I mean every impression of an inter-psychical photography, so to speak, willed or not willed, passive or active.' Much as Bagehot before him, Tarde saw imitation as a key mechanism of social life. 'The social being, in the degree that he is social, is

essentially imitative'; society 'began on the day when one man first copied another'. (Tarde 1903, 11, 28)

Society may therefore be defined as a group of beings who are apt to imitate one another, or who, without actual imitation, are alike in their possession of common traits which are ancient copies of the same model. (Tarde 1903, 68)

The self which appears in Tarde's account has no stable, immutable character; there is nothing that individuals essentially are. This is arguably true for all human beings everywhere, but it was, more than anything, under the ever-changing conditions of life in modern society that this instability and mutability came to the fore. The modern self was so obviously context-dependent and socially constructed — created in interaction with the environment and with other human beings. Charles Horton Cooley discussed this as the "looking glass self" — '[w]hat we call 'me,' 'mine,' or 'myself' is, then not something separate from the general life, but the most interesting part of it, a part whose interest arises from the very fact that it is both general and individual.' (Cooley 2010, 1) You can only develop a proper sense of self, as George Herbert Mead put it, once you simultaneously come to see yourself as a subject and as an object. (Mead 1964, 135–226)

[H]e enters his own experience as a self or individual, not directly and immediately, not by becoming a subject to himself, but only in so far as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved. (Mead 1964, 138)

Tarde himself compared imitation to the influence of hypnosis, another turn-of-the-twentieth century fad and, as Tarde saw it, the outcome was profoundly problematic. Members of modern society, just like subjects undergoing hypnosis, are exceedingly suggestible and they blindly follow the instructions given to them by the hypnotist. 'The social like the hypnotic state is only a form of a dream, a dream of command and a dream of action'; '[s]ociety is imitation and imitation is a kind of somnambulism'. (Tarde 1903, 77, 87) As the psychologist Boris Sidis discovered in his laboratory at Harvard, it is possible to make a hypnotized person do almost anything and members of crowds are at least as suggestible.

[N]owhere else, except perhaps in solitary confinement, are the voluntary movements of men so limited as they are in the crowd; and the larger the crowd is the greater is this limitation, the lower sinks the individual. ... Large, massive social organisms produce, as a rule, very small persons. (Sidis 1898, 299)

### **Neurasthenia and the crowd as problem**

For the educated members of the middle class, that is, the crowd constituted a problem — indeed the central problem of modern society. To them, a self which was submerged

in the crowd was lost and a self without a unique identity was a nobody. ‘One whose desires and impulses are not his own,’ as John Stuart Mill explained in *On Liberty*, 1859, ‘has no character, no more than a steam-engine has a character’. (Mill 1859, 108; cf. Smits 2004, 298–324) In the 1890s, suspicion of the crowd, and disgust with the imitative personality became staples of the received opinions of all educated people. (Borch 2013, 34–47) ‘The given suggestion reverberates from individual to individual,’ as Sidis put it, ‘gathers strength, and becomes so overwhelming as to drive the crowd into a fury of activity, into a frenzy of excitement’. (Sidis 1898, 303) ‘[A]mong the special characteristics of crowds, there are several,’ Gustave Le Bon argued:

such as impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments, and others besides — which are almost always observed in beings belonging to inferior forms of evolution — in women, savages, and children, for instance. (Le Bon 1896, 17)

As the educated members of the middle class agreed, something had to be done. Each person had to defend his or her right to be a particular someone. In the first decades of the twentieth century, this obligation was more than anything discussed as a matter of asserting one’s “personality”. (Nicholson 1998, 52–68; cf. Blackman 2008, 23–47) A personality was understood as a unique collection of psychological traits that belonged to each person by virtue of his or her nature. A personality was innate, that is, and it could not be copied off others, but it could be suppressed and thereby stunted in its development. (Cf. Carus 1910, 364–401; Trendelenburg 1910, 336–363) In order for each person to flourish, it was crucial that his or her personality could come to be expressed and, since personalities differed, these expressions could never be the same from one person to the other.

Yet self-expression was no easy matter. Whenever the new personalities tried to express themselves, they ran up against the challenges posed by life in modern society. Most obviously, they got sick. (Cf. Szokolczai 1998, 132–167; Kustermans and Ringmar 2011) In the 1880s and 1890s, a new affliction of the nerves, known as “neurasthenia”, was spreading like an epidemic among the educated members of the middle classes both in Europe and North America. Neurasthenia, George Beard explained in *American Nervousness* (1881), was a condition which affected a person’s nervous system, leaving its sufferer weak, passive and highly impressionable. (Beard 1881; cf. Schuster 2011; Lutz 1991; Gijswijt-Hofstra 2001) Neurasthenia constituted, said William James, who himself suffered from the condition, ‘a chronic sense of weakness, torpor, lethargy, fatigue, insufficiency, impossibility, unreality, and powerlessness of will’. (James 1911, 23) In Germany, the condition was discussed as *Reizsamkeit*, “irritability”, and associated with the exhausting pace of life typical of the modern city. (Lamprecht 1905; Simmel 1972, 11–19; Cowan 2008, 24–31) In France, doctors referred to a *condition splénétique*, which they in turn associated with ennui or boredom. (Tardieu 1913, 137–138) Despite their proverbial optimism, neurasthenia was common among Americans too. (Lutz 1991, 63–98) As the most modern country in the world, the United States had the most hectic pace of life, the longest working hours and thereby the highest levels of stress. In addition, the

traffic, noise and pollution of the cities — and the sheer multitude of the disparate peoples who mingled there — combined to make Americans sick.

Neurasthenia was often regarded as a result of the feminization of social life. (Lutz 1991, 35) Modern society had made men more sensitive and more refined, and although this was a sign of progress, and thereby a positive development, to the extent that men were growing effeminate and weak, it was a source of considerable worry too. But not everyone was exposed to the problem to the same degree. Neurasthenia affected mainly the more sensitive souls, and in the United States, white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestants were overrepresented among them. By contrast, neurasthenia was not thought to be a worry for members of the lower classes, for African Americans, nor for recent immigrants such as Italians or Poles. In Europe, likewise, manual laborers and farmers were exempt. The lives and livelihoods of members of these groups were not as dependent on their nerves as on their bodies and, in any case, they were thought to have more robust physical constitutions.

This diagnosis was premised on what we might think of as an economy of the nervous system. (Lutz 1991, 3–4; cf. James 1911, 3–39) Every person, Silas Weir Mitchell explained in best-selling books such as *Wear and Tear Or, Hints for the Overworked* (1871), and *Fat and Blood and How to Make Them* (1877), has a certain amount of “nervous energy” which either can be saved or spent. (Mitchell 1877b; Mitchell 1897) It is spent through exhausting activities — through overwork, stress, late nights and early mornings — but also through indulgences such as gambling, financial speculation, alcohol abuse, or excessive sexual activity, including, most deleteriously, masturbation. (Hunt 1998, 575–615) “Dissipation” was the medical term for nervous energy that was spent unwisely, and dissipation eventually led to neurasthenia. On the other hand, nervous energy could be saved, and one’s reserves restored, by engaging in relaxing activities or, in extreme cases, through complete bed rest. This was a cure particularly well suited for women who, Mitchell explained, were likely to have their stores of nervous energy depleted when taking up gainful employment outside of their homes. (Mitchell 1875) The advice was to focus on housework or on repetitive tasks such as needlepoint or knitting. In extreme cases, women were advised to abstain from activities of all kinds. Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s short story, *The Yellow Wall Paper* (1901), tells the tale of a neurasthenic woman who gradually goes crazy from staring at the walls in the room to which she has been confined.

### **Reassertion of the will**

Members of the educated middle classes had tried to reassert themselves, but they had failed. Struck down by neurasthenia, they had become listless, passive and confused. Medical professionals at the time identified this as a problem of “the will”. (Cowan 2008, 69–110; Radkau 1998; Ringmar 2017b) It was the will, they argued, that was “weak” or “irresolute” in neurasthenic patients, and in some pathological cases it was entirely missing. Neurasthenia expressed itself as a *maladie de la volonté*, which too had taken on epidemic proportions. The bed rest had been tried, but often it only made the patients more passive. Instead, in the decade after the year 1900, a more active approach came

increasingly to be attempted. The solution to the problem of the modern self, medical doctors and writers of assorted self-help books now argued, consisted in finding ways to “restore” or “reassert” the will. (Ribot 1894; Payot 1903; Lévy 1898)

The first task was to locate the will. Here a challenge had recently been posed by science. From a purely scientific point of view, the likes of the Harvard psychologist Hugo Münsterberg argued, there was no need to assume the existence of a will, since human actions satisfactorily could be explained as a result of the operations of innate reflexes and instincts. (Münsterberg 1888; cf. Cowan 2008, 86–90) As the British biologist Thomas Huxley — known as “Darwin’s bulldog” — observed: “It seems to me that in men, as in brutes, there is no proof that any state of consciousness is the cause of change in the motion of the matter of the organism.” (Huxley 1899, 244; cf. Wegner 2003, 65–69) Human beings, that is, were fully determined by biological evolution and by their physiology, and there was no need to stipulate the existence of a will understood as an undetermined first cause. This, in a sense, was a biological counterpart to the sociology of imitation. In both cases, human beings were regarded as fully determined by outside forces and there was consequently nothing inside us — and certainly no “free will” — that was uniquely ours. This, to many educated members of the middle class, was a profoundly troubling conclusion.

Picking up the challenge, Théodule Ribot, in *Les maladies de la volonté* (1883), agreed that actions originate in reflexes and instincts, but this, he argued, still leaves a role for the will in determining which reflexes and instincts that come to be expressed in action. (Ribot 1883; Ribot 1894) The body proposes, as it were, but the will disposes; our biological urges can be channeled, directed or stopped entirely by acts of the will independently exercised. The will, thus understood, operates through our powers of inhibition and to acquire will power means more than anything to learn how to master our bodies, to restrain and control ourselves. (Smith 1992, 27–65) It was such restraint that was lacking in neurasthenics, but also in hysterics and everyone — women, children, savages — who let themselves be ruled by their bodies rather than by their minds. Hysteria, much as neurasthenia, was a psychological affliction commonly diagnosed in the last decades of the nineteenth century. (Micale 1993, 496–526) The problem with hysterics was that they failed to integrate their personality into one coherent, self-ruled self. As a result, they were unable to exercise their will and to properly control themselves.

Ribot’s argument proved enormously influential, and provided the intellectual foundation for much of the subsequent advice given to both neurasthenics and hysterics. (Cf. James 1890a, 2:486–592) To strengthen your will was to learn how to resist temptations, to defer short-term gratification in favor of long-term goals, and thereby to discipline and take charge of yourself. To take charge of yourself was first of all to take charge of your body, for example through physical exercise. Compare the turn-of-the-twentieth century boom in calisthenics, Swedish gymnastics, nudism, yoga and physical fitness regimes of all kinds; or compare the interest in vegetarianism and other specialized diets. (Cowan 2008, 111–170) All over Europe, people were exercising together and, in Germany in particular, the nudist movement gathered many hundreds of thousands of members. (Williams 2007, 23–104) Although the cult of the naked body



subsequently came to be associated with a fascist aesthetic, this was not exclusively the case at the time. There were several large socialist organizations, too, which took nudism as an important feature of their activities. (Williams 2007, 23–65)

Once you had taken charge of your body, it was time to take charge of your mind. You do this best, as Paul Émile Lévy explained in *L'Éducation rationnelle de la volonté* (1898), by means of auto-suggestion or self-hypnosis, (Lévy 1898; Lévy 1920) that is, by talking to yourself, by working on your mind, and by envisioning the kind of person which you would like to be. By preparing yourself mentally beforehand in this fashion, you will know what to do when the occasion arises and you will act more or less automatically. It is through such mental preparation that the will is strengthened. This, too, Lévy explained, required inhibition — the ability to stop oneself from thinking bad thoughts. Positive thinking would allow a better self to be created, a person more in charge of herself:

Now, by learning to handle our will, we shall learn to govern our method of reaction, consequently to keep painful emotions or sensations far from our consciousness, and, on the contrary to extra from pleasant emotions, or sensations, all the joy that they can give us. It is therefore accurate to say that our entire happiness depends on the education of the will. (Lévy 1920, 134–135)

This is the method that William James — half-mockingly, half-admiringly — referred to as “the mind cure”. (James 1902, 108) The irony, which did not escape an astute observer such as Lévy, was that people in modern society needed advice from experts on how to exert their own will — they need help to self-help. (Lévy 1920, 131) Or, as Tarde may have pointed out, it was curious how everybody, in strengthening their will power at the same time and in the same fashion, seemed to be imitating each other.

But self-control, thus understood, was essentially a defensive measure. The next step was self-assertion. Here the will was no longer understood merely as an inhibitory force, but instead as a creative force which proved both biology and Tardean sociology wrong: human beings did indeed have it in their power to devise plans and to use their will to execute them. Acts of the will were imaginary acts, expressions of the free life of the spirit, which broke with the environment, with the crowd, imitation, science and determination. The writings of Friedrich Nietzsche contained a powerful expression of these ideas. (Podolsky and Tauber 1999, 299–311; Wirth 2009, 101–111) Nietzsche had famously nothing but scorn for the “herd mentality” and “resentment” of the crowd and he was disgusted with all the signs of weakness and sickness he saw around him. The task, he insisted, was to find a way for individuals to cure themselves by means of creative exercises of the will. These teachings fit perfectly with the diagnoses reached by medical professionals in the first decade of the twentieth century, and this was also when Nietzsche for the first time came to be widely read. Soon something of a Nietzsche cult was sweeping across Europe. (Aschheim 1994, 17–50)

### **Will power and violence**

Self-assertion requires some material on which to assert yourself; you need some

malleable clay, as it were, which you can mold into your own preferred shape. Nature is an obvious place to turn to for these purposes. Nature is far easier to influence than an urban or social environment, and even a weak-willed man, who never would dare to contradict his boss, can learn how to cut down a tree or shoot a deer. In fact, nature forces you to fend for yourself since it has none of the conveniences that make life in the city so easy and so emasculating. These were the reasons why city dwellers at the beginning of the twentieth century often would spend their weekends on nature hikes, and why groups such as the Wandervögel in Germany and the Boy Scouts in Britain made hiking into a national past-time. In the United States, neurasthenia sufferers were often encouraged to “go west” and explore the new national parks, only recently brought under federal jurisdiction. (Mitchell 1877a, 39–73; Muir 1901, 1–36) In fact, thanks to the rapidly expanding network of railroads, even the distant wilderness was easily accessible to city dwellers on the east coast. ‘Thousands of tired, nerve-shaken, over-civilized people,’ wrote John Muir, an enthusiastic promoter of the new national parks, ‘are beginning to find out that going to the mountains is going home; that wildness is a necessity; and that mountain parks and reservations are useful not only as fountains of timber and irrigating rivers, but as fountains of life.’ (Muir 1901, 1)

And those who could not go west themselves could read about the experience in travel guides and adventure stories and thereby strengthen their will by proxy, as it were. Owen Wister’s *The Virginian: A Horseman of the Plains* (1903), is generally considered to be the first novel featuring a “cowboy”, inaugurating a genre which was to retain a firm hold on book-readers and movie-goers for close to a century. (Wister 1904; cf. Kuenz 2001, 98–128) Wister was a neurasthenic who had cured himself through strenuous activities out west and, in *The Virginian*, he introduced all the themes which later were to become staples of the genre: the rugged, taciturn tender of bovine herds; the saloon bar with its sultry matron, hard-drinking customers and poker games; the bank robbers and the posse of anxious civilians who set off to roundup them up. Already the same year as *The Virginian* appeared, *The Great Train Robbery*, the first movie on a Wild West theme, was released to the public, moving the same dreams of violence and self-assertion to the silver screen. (Porter 1903) As both books and movies made clear, it was easy to exercise your will out west: there was no law, no cities and no factories, and the obstacles put up by the natives were easily removed by the owner of a Colt revolver with enough rounds of ammunition.

A kindred literary genre comprised stories of adventures set in the colonies. (Green 1980; Brantlinger 1990, 19–46) In the colonies, their authors explained, it was far easier to get things done than back home in Europe and they were, as such, the ideal setting in which neurasthenics could exercise their will. In the colonies, uncultivated land and an abundance of natural resources were there for the taking, and you could live like a lord with servants and natives paying deference to you in a way which no Europeans, of whatever social class, had lived for centuries. (Cohen 1969, 112; Cooper and Stoler 1997; Hall 2002) Great challenges were waiting for their arrival, and just as in the American West, there were no cities, no factories, no institutional constraints, no routines, social rules or moral codes. Like Rudyard Kipling’s bridge-builder, the Europeans were going to master the tempestuous torrents of mighty rivers, or perhaps take up the role of the

‘pious, practical missionary’ which Henry Morton Stanley had called for in a letter published in the Daily Telegraph on October 15, 1875. (Kipling 1898, 3–47; Stanley 1875, 134–159) It was king Mtesa of Uganda, Stanley explained, who needed assistance:

It is the practical Christian tutor, who can teach people how to become Christians, cure their diseases, construct dwellings, understand and exemplify agriculture, and turn his hand to anything like a sailor — this is the man who is wanted. (Stanley 1875, 152–153)

We left France to become kings, wrote a French colonial administrator looking back on his career, ‘[a]nd not do-nothing kings either, but artists at our job, enlightened despots organizing our kingdoms according to maturely reflected plans’. (Cohen 1969, 111) The choice of a career in the colonies, wrote another French official, was shaped by a wish ‘to change the world. To assume real responsibilities, to dispose of real powers of tutelage and protection. In sum to be a chief.’ (Cohen 1969, 110) I offered my services to the Royal Geographical Society of London, as Richard Burton explained in 1874, recalling his journey to Mecca,

thoroughly tired of “progress” and of “civilization” ... and longing, if truth be told, to set foot on that mysterious spot which no vacation tourist has yet described, measured, sketched and photographed, I revolved to resume my old character of a wandering “Dervish,” and to make the attempt. (Burton 1874, 1–3)

As Paul Rohrbach noted in 1915, it was ‘the love of enterprise and the desire of shaping his life along broader and freer lines than is possible at home’, which made Germans leave for the country’s new African possessions. (Rohrbach 1915, 138)

Not only our men, but also our women in Africa notice with satisfaction the absence of that restraint which at home is due to the demands of social sets and habits. ... There is inspiration even for people who at home would have withered, in the thought that they are the sole arbiters of their own actions and their choice of associates. (Rohrbach 1915, 140)

In order to make room for German colonizers, Rohrbach suggested, all African natives should be eradicated. (Erichsen and Olusoga 2010)

The American war with Spain which broke out in April 1898 can be interpreted from the same perspective. (Hofstadter 1952, 173–200) Among American decision-makers, it was Theodore Roosevelt, then Secretary of the Navy, who most insistently pushed for war. As a young man, Roosevelt had suffered from neurasthenia yet, through strenuous physical exercise and constant activity, he had managed to cure himself. He remained active throughout his life — going on hunting trips, writing books, traveling in Europe, collecting geological samples, playing tennis, climbing mountains, and pursuing both an academic and a political career. ‘Black care rarely sits with a rider whose pace is fast enough,’ he wrote. (Quoted in Lutz 1991, 78; cf. Barsness 1969, 609–619; Walker 1960, 358–366) The remedy that had worked so well for Roosevelt himself he prescribed

for the country as a whole. 'I wish to preach not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife.' (Roosevelt 1903, 3) The highest form of success comes 'to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the splendid ultimate triumph'.

We do not admire the man of timid peace. We admire the man who embodies victorious effort; the man who never wrongs his neighbor, who is prompt to help a friend, but who has those virile qualities necessary to win in the stern strife of actual life. (Roosevelt 1903, 4)

Roosevelt's entire political program — including his support for the Indian wars and the establishment of national parks — can be understood as a means of ensuring a strenuous life for all Americans. And this explains his enthusiasm for imperial expansion. (Hofstadter 1952, 173–200) Across the Pacific Ocean, a new frontier was opening up, and the war with Spain provided an excellent opportunity to explore it. The choice, as he put it, 'was whether we should shrink like cowards from the contest, or enter into it as beseeemed a brave and high spirited people; and, once in, whether failure or success should crown our banners'. (Roosevelt 1903, 9) Only timid, stupid, ignorant and lazy men will refuse the challenge, Roosevelt insisted, and in this group he included 'the over-civilized man, who has lost the great fighting, masterful virtues'. Men like this all 'shrink from seeing us do our share of the world's work, by bringing order out of chaos in the great, fair tropical islands from which the valor of our soldiers and sailors has driven the Spanish flag'. These, he explained, 'are the men who fear the strenuous life, who fear the only national life which is really worth leading'. (Roosevelt 1903, 9)

When the First World War broke out in the summer of 1914, it was not greeted with a general sense of jubilation among all Europeans. (Ringmar, 2017a) There were enthusiastic, bellicose, crowds thronging the boulevards of Berlin and Paris, to be sure, but their numbers were fairly small, and smaller, certainly, than the crowds that gathered in opposition to the war. A majority of Europeans remained skeptical or worried, and when the soldiers left for their respective fronts in the first weeks of August, they did so not with enthusiasm but with a grim sense of determination. (Verhey 2000, 96; Pennell 2012, 52) Yet if we look more closely at the people who really were enthusiastic supporters of the war effort, we find that intellectuals, artists, city dwellers and university students were vastly overrepresented among them. (Stromberg 1973, 109–122; Hynes 1998) That is, enthusiasm was confined to the people who were most likely to identify themselves as neurasthenics. To them, the war was a romantic enterprise, an occasion for manly heroism, and, as such, it presented a unique opportunity to exercise their will. On the battlefield, they would finally escape the routines of city life and the confines of bourgeois respectability. The war was going to cure them all.

It has often been remarked that the soldiers who returned from the front in 1918 were reluctant to discuss the war, even with members of their own families. (Eksteins 1989, 297). It was not until 10 years later that a spate of memoirs suddenly appeared, including Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1928) and Robert

Graves' *Goodbye to All That* (1929). (Remarque 2005; Graves 2000) Although both books were labeled as "anti-war tracts" at the time, it was soon obvious that the war, as remembered, was something quite different from the war as experienced. What many ex-soldiers recalled were not the horrors of the trenches as much as the selfless sacrifices of fellow soldiers and their intense sense of camaraderie. Under fire, when going over the top, when crossing into no-man's land, the problem of the modern self no longer arose. Instead, each soldier was an integral part of a crowd that faced oblivion together. Adolf Hitler was one of these soldiers. It was, said Hitler, 'the greatest and most unforgettable time of my earthly existence'. (Eksteins 1989, 306; cf. Weber 2010) What Hitler loved was what he remembered as the selflessness, the energy and the larger-than-life quality of the war; what he hated was everything he believed to stand in the way of such dynamism. The aim of the Nazi Party after 1933 was to replicate the ethos of the trenches on a national, indeed on a pan-European, level.

### **Character vs. personality**

Let us briefly summarize the argument made thus far. The problem of the modern self, we said, is the problem of how to provide a self for oneself in a society characterized by uncertainty and economic risk. At the turn of the twentieth century, people were required to define a personality that was uniquely theirs. How this could be done was less clear, however, and when people failed to do it successfully, they often fell ill with various afflictions of the nerves, of which neurasthenia was the most common. Neurasthenia, in turn, could be cured if people only learned how to strengthen their will and to assert themselves. Violence, exercised both against oneself and against others, was integral to this project of self-assertion, and those who could not exercise it in person often did so vicariously. This is how a rhetoric of violence came to be inscribed into the dreams dreamed in modern society. In a society which is becoming ever more peaceful, we could argue, the rhetoric of violence will become ever more transgressive, and thus ever more enticing. Such a society is unlikely to be at peace with itself and with the rest of the world.

The question is whether things could have worked out differently; whether there was another way to address the problem of the modern self. As a way to think about this question, consider briefly the fate of the concept of "character".(Collini 1985, 29–50; Cushman 1990, 599–611) "Character" was a key term in the nineteenth century, endlessly invoked in treaties on education and in moral tracts. People in Victorian society were, more than anything, judged by their character, and to develop a "good character" was, for that reason, crucial to social success. Character was also what the new concept of "personality" came to replace, yet the concept of character presented each person with quite different imperatives. Above all, the concept of character did not rely on a rhetoric of violence.

As Victorian moralists explained, a person's character was formed by the habits he or she had come to acquire. This was obvious already from the etymology of the word. In ancient Greece, *kharakter* referred to the grooves an engraver creates with his chisel, such as the letters inscribed on a monument or a stele. In much the same fashion, a person's character is formed when actions, practices and thoughts which are repeated

on a daily basis gradually come to take on a certain shape. (James 1890b; cf. Carlisle 2014) The habits create grooves, as it were, in the plastic material of the neurophysiological system. The pattern thus constituted allows us to act automatically and without explicitly considering what to do in each given situation. Character gives you “sustaining power”, as Samuel Smiles called it, and William James compared a good character to a capital investment on which you can draw throughout your life. (Smiles 1889, 15; James 1890b, 1:122) Eventually the habits come to constitute a “second nature”, which is natural in the sense of being intrinsic to each person, but at the same time also a willed creation. The grooves formed by our habits make up our character and our character is who we are.

This is not to say that you cannot consciously influence your character, but you can do so only by painstakingly repeating the actions through which habits come to be formed, and you must watch yourself carefully in the process. ‘Not a day passes without its discipline, whether for good or for evil’ (Smiles 1889, 22). Most habits are established early in life, and since a character takes time to develop, there is no time to lose. Already at the age of 25, James noted, ‘[y]ou see the little lines of cleavage running through the character ... from which the man can by-and-by no more escape than his coat-sleeve can suddenly fall into a new set of folds’, and by the age of thirty it is already too late — ‘the character has set like plaster, and will never soften again’. (James 1890b, 1:121) Since the young are unlikely to know which patterns to form, they need guidance and the requisite education started at home and continued at school. With an emphasis on conscientiousness and duty, character formation was more than anything a means of inculcating conduct which was deemed acceptable in the eyes of established society. James called habit the ‘enormous fly-wheel of society’ — a “conservative agent” which kept people in their places and which kept society together. (James 1890b, 1:121)

Compare the notion of a “personality” which, we said, came to replace the notion of a character in the decades around the turn of the twentieth century. A personality designated the unique traits of an individual, not the mores of society, and as such it was regarded as a scientific term and not as a term of moral approbation. (Nicholson 1998, 57, 59) A personality was something that belonged to a particular person; it was something that you had and not something that you copied off of others. This is not to say that a personality could not be developed too, but it was developed above all as it was being expressed. A personality, much as a work of art, unfolded through a person’s actions, and this is why will power and self-assertion could be understood as means of self-creation. A character, by contrast, was instead the foundation for an action, its basis, and, as such, it was revealed, if at all, only slowly and in parts. As a foundation for actions, a person’s character was not available to direct introspection and it was often far easier for others to describe than for the person whose character it was. As such, a character was difficult to control, at least once the habits of which it was composed had come to be fully formed. A person with a character had a history that quite automatically acted itself out in the present. For this reason, a character, to an individual with a personality, was often understood as an obstacle that had to be overcome.

The best way to judge a person’s character, Victorians had agreed, was to test it.

Although a person's character normally was more or less hidden, it was likely to be revealed under extraordinary circumstances. This included situations where a person encountered hardship, setbacks and temptations. War was a good example. Many people like to talk big and walk with a swagger, but it is only once they are battle-tested that we learn what stuff they are made of. It is under fire that a person proves his mettle — his courage, endurance and loyalty to his comrades and his cause. (Collini 1985, 49; cf. Harari 2008, 1–25) Or take life in the colonies. (Eves 1996, 85–138; Collini 1985, 47–48) Here, too, there were many difficulties to encounter, but above all there were temptations. A colonial administrator could abuse the exceptional powers he had been given: he might take advantage of the lack of legal institutions and treat the locals with excessive force; he might defraud his government and put money in his own pocket; engage in various forms of debauchery and licentiousness; or simply “go native” and abandon his civilization and his faith. A particular temptation was presented by the native women, who were not only exotic and alluring but also, reputedly, sexually insatiable. (McClintock 1995) For missionaries, it was easy to compare such temptations to a test which God, in his wisdom, had decided to put them through. It was when dealing with temptations such as these that a colonial administrator's true character was revealed.

It is easy to be nostalgic for the person with a character and to be troubled by the individual with a personality. Compare the role which violence plays in these two accounts. Persons with a character seem more measured, more reasonable, while individuals with a will to strengthen and a personality to assert tend to have violent dreams and embark on violent projects. A character is something you reveal, not something you assert, and any such revelations are necessarily incidental to your actions and not the reason for undertaking them. In the nineteenth century, wars and colonial adventures were valued as tests of qualities which already were acquired — and military officers and colonial administrators were often eager to take the test for which their training had prepared them — but they did not expect the tests to add something that was not already there. (Hynes 1998, 34–42) For a person with a character, you are the way you are — or rather, the way you have been made — and there is no way of overcoming the force of history in one fell swoop. The will certainly plays a role in character formation too, but that is the will of your formative, and far earlier, years, which was engaged in the painstaking task of establishing good habits. This is not to say that people with a character were less disposed to committing acts of violence or that they acted more humanely. They could be cruel too, and at least as bellicose, but they were cruel and bellicose for different reasons. Their cruelty and bellicosity were not ways of strengthening their will or asserting themselves.

### **Dewey on the character of the modern self**

Yet the concept of character eventually came to be replaced by the concept of personality and there were good reasons why this happened. A person's character, in the nineteenth century view, was determined by the habits he or she acquired, but the habits which people acquired in traditional agricultural society were of little use in the city. Take trustworthiness. To be known as a trustworthy person was important in the countryside, where most interactions took place between people who knew each other and who met

often, but it was irrelevant in the city where most interactions took place between strangers who never would see each other again. Instead, city life made new and different demands. (Lears 2000, paras. 12–19) What mattered here was, more than anything, how you “presented yourself” and how you “came across”, but self-presentation was a project of the individual with a personality and not of the person with a character. In fact, habits of any kind were difficult to establish in a modern society that was in a constant state of change. And even if a character eventually was established, it was soon made obsolete. Losing their character without acquiring a personality for themselves, many of the new city dwellers lost their moral bearings and gave in to the temptations of vice, crime and drink. This, at least, was the complaint of middle-class moralists. (Collini 1985, 45)

This was a predicament addressed by John Dewey in several of his writings, most notably in his extensive thoughts on the role of education. (Dewey 1916) Dewey was scathing of all talk of the will as a disembodied spiritual force and he rejected the notion of a self which could be asserted in opposition to society. As human beings we are always already situated in the world, he argued; we are reacting to the situations in which we find ourselves, and what we call the will is integral to this situation and to our reaction to it. (Dewey 1890, 384) And the self, he insisted, was necessarily socially situated. Indeed, Dewey argued that everything that we take to be “inside us” originally has come to us from the outside. There can consequently be no self which is given apart from society and there is thus nothing unique about our individual selves. (Dewey 1890, 365–368, 371; Dewey 1917, 272–275; cf. Earls 2008, 20)

Dewey did not give up on the notion of character, but tried instead to adapt it to fit the conditions prevailing in modern society. Consider his discussion of the crowd. Instead of being horrified by imitation like so many of his peers, Dewey pointed out that imitation is never only a matter of the mechanical reproduction of existing models. (Dewey 1917, 267–268, 274). In any given situation, there are always a large number of different things we can copy and, for that reason, we are necessarily forced to make choices. This allows for the existence of a separate self which is unique, not in the sense of being original and unprecedented, but in the sense of uniquely belonging to a particular person. We are socially determined — socially determined “all the way down” — but we are also always placed in particular situations that present us with particular challenges, and this includes the social relations that we come to establish. Even if we are fully formed by our social network, our place in the network is our very own. (Dewey 1890, 352; cf. Earls 2008, 13) Since this is the case, the choices we make are ours too, even if their content is fully socially determined, and once the choices come to accumulate over the course of time, a certain path will be traced. This path, said Dewey, is our character. This is not character understood as the sedimentation of habits, nor as a groove that gradually deepens, nor as a flywheel which guarantees social stability. Instead, it is character understood as a long succession of choices made in response to different situations, and as a result of where these choices eventually take us.

To Dewey, this was a process of gradual self-realization. (Dewey 1890, 417–419) We start out unsure of who we are and where we want to go, but gradually, through the path we trace, we come to take on a more distinct character. We walk into our character, as it were. This is where Dewey saw a role for education, but not education as people in



the nineteenth century had defined it. The point is not to socialize children into accepting the norms of established society; instead we should think of education as a map. (Dewey 1902, 26–27) A map, after all, is nothing but the accumulated experiences of the people of the past, and their experiences, in turn, are a result of the choices they once made. Education, properly understood, is the process whereby the experiences of the people of the past come to have a bearing on the experiences of the people of the present. This is not a matter of an imposition but a matter of guidance given to those who request it. The map does not tell us where to go, and it is not a substitute for our own experience; the map is not our character, as it were, but it helps us when we are trying to chart our own course. (Dewey 1902, 26)

Dewey's conception of a character provides an attractive solution to the problem of the modern self. It fits the conditions of life in modern society since it is a dynamic conception that presupposes change, new challenges and constant choices. It acknowledges sociability and imitation but at the same time rejects the idea of a will and a personality set against society and the rest of the world. There is no rhetoric of violence here and the dreams dreamed by Deweyian individuals are for that reason likely to have less deleterious consequences. This is a modern self at home in the modern world and at peace with itself and with others. But it is also a far less spectacular answer than those to which we have become accustomed, and it is for that reason unlikely to be attractive to individuals preoccupied with strengthening their wills and asserting their personalities.

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