

## **HOW THE IDEAL OF *BILDUNG* HAS TRANSFORMED LIBERALISM: FROM J. S. MILL AND T. H. GREEN TO J. DEWEY, J. RAWLS, AND A. SEN<sup>1</sup>**

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### Abstract

In a famous 1962 book, the historian Macpherson coined the expression « possessive individualism » to characterize classical liberalism. In this paper, I will present a critique of Macpherson and show how a very different version of liberal individualism emerged in the Anglophone world in the 19<sup>th</sup> century under the influence of the post-Kantian notion of *Bildung*. I will show how liberalism evolved from an atomistic and a-social view of the Self and of « negative » freedom as « freedom from » to a *developmental* and historical conception and to « positive » freedom as « freedom to » (Green T. H., 1881). Such a view finds its fullest expression in John Stuart Mill's conception of self-development and individuality « as one of the leading essentials of well-being » and as « the chief ingredient of individual and social progress » (*On Liberty*, 1859). I will then describe how this vision has been the inspiration of the « new » social liberalism of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and has led, for instance, to John Dewey's vision of liberal individualism (1893) and to John Rawls's critique of utilitarianism (1971, 1999). Amartya Sen's capability approach focuses too on development and agency as constituents of individual wellbeing (Sen A., 2009). The notion of *Bildung* is thus central for understanding the liberal concept of the Self not in terms of « having », but of « being », as the young Marx would have said.

### Résumé

Pour caractériser le libéralisme classique, l'historien Macpherson a employé, dans un livre célèbre de 1962, la formule "individualisme possessif". Cet article présente une critique de cette formule et montre comment une version bien différente de l'individualisme libéral a émergé au cours du 19<sup>e</sup> siècle dans le monde anglophone sous l'influence de la notion post-kantienne de *Bildung*. Le libéralisme a ainsi évolué à partir d'une conception atomistique et a-sociale du Soi (*Self*) et d'une liberté conçue comme "négative" pour aller vers une conception historique et développementale du Soi et de la liberté comme "positive" (T.H. Green, 1881). Cette nouvelle conception trouve son expression la plus complète chez John Stuart Mill et sa définition du libre développement de l'individualité " comme l'un des principes essentiels du bien-être" et "le facteur principal du progrès individuel et social" (*De la liberté*, 1859). Elle va inspirer le "nouveau" libéralisme social qui émerge au 20<sup>e</sup> siècle avec, par exemple, l'individualisme libéral de John Dewey (1893) et la critique de l'utilitarisme par John Rawls (Rawls, 1971, 1999). L'approche de l'économiste Amartya Sen par les capacités (Sen, 2009) se concentre également sur le développement de soi et la capacité d'agir (*agency*) comme essentiels au bien-être de l'individu. La notion de *Bildung* apparaît bien comme centrale pour comprendre le concept libéral du Soi en termes non pas d'avoir (*having*) mais d'être (*being*), comme aurait dit le jeune Marx.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on some of my previous published papers: « John Stuart Mill et les transformations de l'individu libéral », in *Tocqueville Review*, vol. 23, n°1, 2012, p. 47-65, « Self-development and social justice, in *The Individual and the Other in Economic Thought*, R. Egge and H. Igersheim (eds.), London, Routledge, 2019, and « The Ideal of Self-development: Personal or Political? » in *Arguing about Justice*, A. Gosseries and Y. Vanderborght (eds.), Louvain, UCL, 2011.

## Introduction

In this paper I would like to sketch how the German ideal of *Bildung*, itself derived from the Ancient Greek *paideia* and translated in English as self-development or self-realization<sup>2</sup>, has had a transformative influence on British liberalism, especially on J. S. Mill (1806-1873) and T. H. Green (1836-1882), as well as on the 20<sup>th</sup> century social liberalism of, among others, J. Dewey (1859-1952), J. Rawls (1921-2001) and A. Sen, and their critique of utilitarianism. The ideal of *Bildung*, of a self-developing individual and of the historicity of societies, has played a central role in dismantling what can be called the utilitarian structure of classical liberalism, leading to a « new » social liberalism that emerged in the 20<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup>.

But what is remarkable is that this transformative influence on conceptions of the human individual and of society has always been *other regarding*, it has never been limited to the self-culture of the superior individual, of the « genius ». In other words, whereas, as Thomas Mann claims<sup>4</sup>, « the German conception has hardly ever included a political dimension » and has valued « interiority, self-absorption or introspection (*Versenkung*) », J. S. Mill as well as T. H. Green and J. Dewey have tried to overcome this elitist dimension and have followed Humboldt's intuition<sup>5</sup> that development or *Ausbildung* is only made possible by the free interaction or *Anbildung* with the extraordinary diversity of the *Umwelt*, both natural and social.

I will first present the conception of a « possessive individualism » that has been suggested as the main determinant of classical liberalism. I will then show how the German ideal of *Bildung* has inspired the transformation of Benthamite utilitarianism in Mill's liberalism in *On Liberty* (1859) and the emergence of a « new » social liberalism in, among others, T. H. Green's positive conception of freedom (1883), J. Dewey's conception of individualism (1893), J. Rawls's theory of justice (1971 and 1999) and A. Sen's conception of capabilities (1999).

### 1. « Possessive individualism » as the main determinant of liberalism

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<sup>2</sup> John Stuart Mill talks of self-development in *On Liberty* (1859) to translate Humboldt's notion of *Bildung* and John Dewey talks about self-realization in « Self-Realization and the Moral Ideal », in *The Philosophical Review*, vol. 2, n°6, 1893, p. 652-664. It is beyond the scope of this paper to develop the case of John Dewey but his ideas about education and teaching are very close to the ideal of *Bildung* and a comparison with Humboldt's programme would be interesting. In his eyes, the purpose of education should not revolve around the acquisition of a pre-determined set of skills, but rather the realization of one's full potential and the ability to use those skills for the greater good. He notes that « to prepare him for the future life means to give him command of himself; it means so to train him that he will have the full and ready use of all his capacities » (*My Pedagogic Creed*, 1897). Rawls suggests a similar ideal of self-realization in his critique of the capitalist Welfare State in *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2001, §42, p. 139.

<sup>3</sup> On the « new » social liberalism, see Freedman M., *The New Liberalism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1986, J. Kloppenborg, *Uncertain Victory. Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, and Audard C., *Qu'est-ce que le libéralisme?* Paris, Gallimard, 2009, ch.IV.

<sup>4</sup> Mann T., *Reden und Aufsätze*, II, 1965, p. 54-55, mentioned by Dumont L., *L'Idéologie allemande*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> See Stahl E.L., *Die religiöse and die humanitätsphilosophische Bildungsidee und die Entstehung des deutschen Bildungsroman* (1934), Bern, Haupt quoted by Dumont L., *op. cit.*, p. 108.

In his ambitious book<sup>6</sup>, Macpherson claims to have unmasked « possessive individualism » (PI) as the main assumption common to liberalism over three centuries. Is this plausible?

### What is possessive individualism?

Following Macpherson, possessive individualism is comprised of the following seven assumptions (p. 263):

- (vii) « Freedom from the dependence on the wills of others »
- (ii) « Except those relations into which the individual enters voluntarily with a view to his own interest »
- (iii) « The individual is the proprietor of his own person and capacities for which he owes nothing to society »
- (iv) « The individual can alienate his capacity to labour, not his own person »
- (v) « Human society consists of a series of market relations [...] between sole proprietors »
- (vi) « Freedom can only be limited by what is necessary to secure the same freedom for others »
- (vii) « Political society is a human contrivance for the protection of property »

He claims that the 17<sup>th</sup> century foundations of liberalism as expressed by Locke are still valid in 20<sup>th</sup> century market societies and remain « the main structure of English liberal theory and the strong and well-built utilitarian structure that lay within » (p. 270).

Macpherson's view emphasizes the utilitarian assumptions in liberalism and echoes Marx's view of liberalism. After a brief period of admiration for Bentham's radicalism<sup>7</sup> and for his influence on reformism<sup>8</sup>, Marx and Engels saw him as epitomizing the new utilitarian society and the role of so-called « innate rights of man » in it that were a barrier to revolutionary progress. The confusion Marx makes between liberalism and utilitarianism is clear to see in this quotation:

« This sphere that we are deserting, within whose boundaries the sale and purchase of labour-power goes on, is in fact a very Eden of the innate rights of man. There alone rule Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham. Freedom, because both buyer and seller of a commodity, say of labour-power, are constrained only by their own free will. They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will. Equality, because each enters into relation with the other, as with a simple owner of commodities, and they exchange equivalent for equivalent. Property, because each disposes only of what is his own. And Bentham, because each looks only to himself. The only force that brings them together and puts them in relation with each other, is the selfishness, the gain and the private interests of each. Each looks to himself only, and no one troubles himself about the rest, and just because they do so, do they all, in accordance with the pre-established harmony of things, or under the auspices of an all-shrewd providence, work together to their mutual advantage, for the common weal and in the interest of all<sup>9</sup> ».

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<sup>6</sup> Macpherson C.B., *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism. Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1962.

<sup>7</sup> See Élie Halévy's great book on Bentham, *Le radicalisme philosophique* (1902).

<sup>8</sup> The Great Reform Act of 1832 that enlarged the franchise in the United Kingdom was the result of the actions of the Radicals or disciples of Bentham, among other political groups.

<sup>9</sup> Marx K., *Capital : A Critique of Political Economy* (1867), Vol. I, Book I, ch.VI, section 2, p. 123.

Leaving aside the inexactitudes of Macpher'on's view of liberalism (Hobbes is certainly not a liberal, Locke is a proto-liberal) and of M'rx's characterization of Bentham as a liberal (he was pro-state intervention and believed in the « artificial » identification of interests through sanctions, not in the « invisible hand » of Adam Smith), « possessive individualism » seems to be a good characterization of the new individualism that Tocqueville saw as central to modernity: « Individualism is a recent expression that a new idea has created. Our fathers only knew of egoism.<sup>10</sup> »

### Liberalism and utilitarianism

However, given that individual freedom is the major concept for modern liberalism, it is crucial that it should distance itself from this perceived utilitarian structure. If the *summum bonum* is pleasure and the avoidance of pain, and if a good society should only aim at maximizing the aggregate satisfaction of its members, then it is indeed obvious that utilitarianism is unable to protect individual freedoms and rights if they contradict the pursuit of general or average utility and welfare. One could mention as an example Helvetius and his advocacy of the sacrifice of the few to the wellbeing of the many:

« Lorsqu'un vaisseau est surpris par de longs calmes et que la famine a, d'une voix impérieuse, commandé de tirer au sort la victime infortunée qui doit servir de pâture à ses compagnons, on l'égorge sans remords : ce vaisseau est l'emblème de chaque nation ; tout devient légitime et même vertueux pour le salut public<sup>11</sup>. »

Bentham's well-known denunciation of human rights as « nonsense on stilts<sup>12</sup> » shows how incompatible liberalism is with utilitarianism. It is therefore not surprising that the subsequent developments of liberalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries should have been characterized by a critique of this utilitarian structure, inherited from the French materialists and from Bentham, as illiberal. J. Rawls, for instance, presents the aim of his liberal theory of justice as fairness as « an alternative to utilitarian thought<sup>13</sup> » based, in contrast to possessive individualism and classical utilitarianism, on the premise that it is impermissible to sacrifice the interests of a few for the good of the many. He writes that « in a just society, the liberties of equal citizenship are taken as settled; the rights secured by justice are not subject to political bargaining or the calculus of social interests<sup>14</sup> ». Rawls refers to his theory as a Kantian contract theory directly connected to Kant's ethics and opposed to utilitarianism as « in justice as fairness the concept of right is prior to that of the good<sup>15</sup> ».

« Persons accept in advance a principle of equal liberty and they do this without any knowledge of their more particular ends. They implicitly agree,

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<sup>10</sup> Tocqueville A. de, *De la démocratie en Amérique* (1840), Paris, Gallimard, La Pléiade, t. II, p. 612.

<sup>11</sup> Helvétius C.-A., « Discours II chap. VI », in *De L'Esprit* (1758), Paris, Fayard, 1988, p. 83-84.

<sup>12</sup> Bentham J., *Sophismes anarchiques*, E. Dumont (éd.), Paris, 1816, see Waldron J., *Nonsense upon Stilts*, London, Methuen, 1987, and Lacroix J. et Pranchère J.-Y., *Le procès des droits de l'homme*, Paris, Le Seuil, 2016, ch. 3.

<sup>13</sup> Rawls J., *A Theory of Justice*, revised edition, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999, §1, p. 20 (*TJ* afterwards).

<sup>14</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* § 1, p. 3-4.

<sup>15</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §6, p. 28, n.16. On Rawls and Kant, see Rawls J., *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, B. Harman (éd.), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2000.

therefore, to conform their conceptions of their good to what the principles of justice require and that the interests requiring the violation of justice have no value<sup>16</sup>. »

In contrast,

« In utilitarianism, the satisfaction of any desire has some value in itself [...] thus, if men take a certain pleasure in discriminating against one another, in subjecting others to lesser liberty as a means of enhancing their self-respect, then the satisfaction of these desires must be weighed in our deliberations according to their intensity.<sup>17</sup> »

## 2. The ideal of *Bildung* and the liberal critique of utilitarianism

However, what has often been overlooked, in this critique of utilitarianism, is the influence of the German ideal of *Bildung*<sup>18</sup>. One tends to forget how influential German philosophy or so-called Continental philosophy, as Mill says, have been on British intellectual history since the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and consequently on American Progressivism and social liberalism in the 20<sup>th</sup>. For instance, Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* was translated by Carlyle, a friend of Mill, who studied in Bonn. Coleridge, of course, introduced German Romanticism to British writers and readers, among them J. S. Mill and George Eliot. German philosophers, mostly Kant, Hegel, and Fichte as well as Herder and Humboldt, were major influences on the late 19<sup>th</sup> century British utilitarians like H. Sidgwick<sup>19</sup> and on British idealists such as T. H. Green, B. Bosanquet and F.H. Bradley, their interest in philosophy starting from theology. In his major study of social democracy and progressivism in Europe and America<sup>20</sup>, James Kloppenberg emphasises the importance of Schiller's dictum, « *immer wird, nie ist* » endorsed by Carlyle in his essay *Characteristics* (1831), not only for Romantic poets, but also for American thinkers such as the Transcendentalists and later for John Dewey. These complex influences are prevalent in Rawls's philosophy as a final effort to detach liberalism from utilitarianism, an effort that culminates in Amartya Sen's critique of utilitarianism and in his own conception of welfare as « expanding substantive freedoms » and capabilities<sup>21</sup>, not solely growth of GDP and aggregate satisfaction.

### J. S. Mill and the ideal of *Bildung*: *On Liberty* (1859)

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<sup>16</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §6, p. 27-28.

<sup>17</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §6, p. 27.

<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, Louis Dumont describes *Bildung* in exactly the same terms as J. S. Mill without mentioning him: as reuniting two conditions, freedom, on the one hand, and diversity of situations or of the *Umwelt*, on the other, which is exactly Mill's interpretation, as I will show (Dumont L., *L'idéologie allemande*, Paris, Gallimard, 1991, p. 124).

<sup>19</sup> In the Preface to the 6<sup>th</sup> edition of his *Methods of Ethics* (1901), Henry Sidgwick confesses to his anxiety when faced with the incompatibility between the Kantian categorical imperative and the Millian principle of utility (Sidgwick H., *Methods of Ethics*, 7<sup>th</sup> edition, with a Foreword by J. Rawls, Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company, 1981, p. XV-XXI). On Rawls and Sidgwick, see Rawls J., « Kantian Constructivism in Moral Theory », in *Collected Papers*, S. Freeman (éd.), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 1999, p. 303-358.

<sup>20</sup> Kloppenberg J., *Uncertain Victory, Social Democracy and Progressivism in European and American Thought, 1870-1920*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 20-2, p. 27 and chapter 5.

<sup>21</sup> Sen A., *Development as Freedom*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1999.

John Stuart Mill is responsible for initiating this new view and transforming the liberal understanding of the individual, at the cost, however, of numerous ambiguities, as he still claims to be a utilitarian<sup>22</sup>, but no longer in the Benthamite sense. The turn from an atomistic view of the Self to a *developmental* and historical one finds its fullest expression in his claim that « the free development of individuality [is] one of the leading essentials of well-being » and « the chief ingredient of individual and social progress<sup>23</sup> ».

In his *Autobiography* (1873), he expresses in vivid terms how his discovery of German philosophy thanks to Coleridge and Carlyle, and his reading of W. von Humboldt, to whom he dedicated *On Liberty*, led him to reject the version of the utility principle with which he was brought up by his father James Mill and by Jeremy Bentham whom he describes in the following terms in his *Essay on Bentham*<sup>24</sup> :

« Self-consciousness, that daemon of the men of genius of our time, from Wordsworth to Byron, from Goethe to Chateaubriand, never was awakened in him (p. 62-63). No one, probably, set out with a more limited conception either of the agencies by which human conduct *is*, or of those by which it *should*, be influenced (p. 63). Bentham's idea of the world is that of a collection of persons pursuing each his separate interest or pleasure (p.70). The training by the human being himself, of his affections and will [...] is a blank in Bentham's system (p. 71). »

Quoting Humboldt as one of his main sources with Coleridge, Mill summarizes his ambitions at the start of *On Liberty* (1859):

« The grand leading principle towards which each argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity<sup>25</sup>. »

In the famous Chapter III, he claims that

« the end of man is the highest and most harmonious development of his powers to a complete and consistent whole [...] therefore the object towards which every human being must ceaselessly direct his efforts is the individuality of power and development<sup>26</sup> ».

There are at least two important benefits to be drawn from this understanding of the Self as a progressive being.

First, the ideal of *Bildung* as free self-development is the basis of a stronger argument for the priority of individual freedom, not as an a-social « natural » right, but one connected to the developmental nature of the individual, the defence of which is the central concept of liberalism. Individuality needs freedom and equal rights for all in order to develop, as individuals can only flourish through personal free choices and deliberative rationality.

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<sup>22</sup> Mill's own version of utilitarianism is presented in his essay *Utilitarianism* (1863).

<sup>23</sup> Mill J. S., ch. 3 « Of Individuality », in *On Liberty* (1859), H.B. Acton (éd.), London, Everyman's Library, 1972, p.124.

<sup>24</sup> Mill J. S., *Essays on Bentham, and Coleridge* (1838), London, Chatto & Windus, 1959.

<sup>25</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 69, see also *Essays on Bentham, and Coleridge* (1838).

<sup>26</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.*, ch. III, p. 125.

« Though our character is formed by circumstances, our own desires can do much to shape those circumstances [...] We have real power over the formation of our own character<sup>27</sup>. »

That process of individuation is most likely to be successful if we are allowed to make our own choices and to develop capacities, which would have been left dormant if society or public opinion were our only source of direction.

« The human faculties of perception, judgment, discriminative feeling, mental activity, and even moral preference, are exercised only in making a choice [...] The mental and moral, like the muscular powers, are improved only by being used [...] He who chooses his plan for himself employs all his faculties<sup>28</sup>. »

Secondly, the ideal of *Bildung* leads Mill to review his defence of utilitarianism and to distance himself even further from Bentham and « possessive individualism ». As freedom to develop is now an essential constituent of happiness, he is thus able to reformulate the utility principle in new terms:

« I regard utility as the ultimate appeal on all ethical questions; but it must be utility in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of man as a *progressive being*<sup>29</sup>. »

The Benthamite utility principle should now be understood as *indirect utilitarianism*:

« I never, indeed, wavered in the conviction that happiness is the test of all rules of conduct, and the end of life. But I now thought that this end was only to be attained by not making it the direct end<sup>30</sup>. »

Individuality, in other words, is one of the main ingredients of human happiness, individually and collectively, and it is for that reason that it should be cultivated. As John Skorupski writes, « the liberal ideal of self-culture (*Bildung*) is perfectly compatible with the greatest happiness principle as only the fullest self-development of one's potential gives access to the highest forms of human happiness. Rawls called this the Aristotelian Principle<sup>31</sup> ».

### TH Green: *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1882)

If Mill was influenced by Humboldt and Coleridge, he never had a deep understanding of Kant's philosophy. In his essay *Utilitarianism* (1863), he dismisses the categorical imperative as meaningless and incomplete without a reference to *the summum bonum* as the ultimate moral criterion. In effect, he writes,

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<sup>27</sup> Mill J. S., *Autobiography* (1873), J.M. Robson (éd), London, Penguin Books, 1989, p. 135, and *Logic*, Book VI.

<sup>28</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.*, ch. III, p. 126.

<sup>29</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.* Introduction, p. 79.

<sup>30</sup> Mill J. S., *Autobiography op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>31</sup> Skorupski J., *Why Read Mill Today?*, London, Routledge, 2006, p. 27.

« a rule even of utter selfishness could be adopted by all rational beings » unless « to give any meaning to Kant's principle, the sense put upon it must be that we ought to shape our conduct by a rule which all rational beings might adopt *with benefit to their collective interest*<sup>32</sup> ».

In contrast to Mill, British idealist philosophers in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century developed a deep interest for Kant and Hegel in their search for an alternative to naturalism and materialism. This is well in evidence in the work of the Oxford philosopher T. H. Green who had a deep influence, among others, on John Dewey and his essay *Self-Realization as the Moral Ideal* (1893). Under the influence of Kant's two *Critiques*, T. H. Green starts his *Prolegomena to Ethics* (1882)<sup>33</sup> with the search for « a philosophy of morals which no adaptation of natural science can supply » (p. 3). He searches for « a Moral Philosophy which shall not be a branch of natural science » (p. 104) and claims that « the reducibility of moral conduct to a series of natural phenomena, and with it the possibility of a physical science of ethics, is here denied » (p. 135). Going beyond Mill's criticism, Green rejects both Bentham's naturalism and utilitarianism as incompatible with an understanding of human freedom as independence from natural desires and inclinations, that is to say, as Kantian autonomy. This is why Green treats indeed the imperative of self-realization as a categorical imperative. Like Kant, Green seeks an account of the agent's duties that is grounded in her agency and does not depend upon contingent and variable inclinations. The goal of self-realization, Green thinks, meets this demand and, in contrast to utilitarianism's definition of the moral ideal based on particular desires and inclinations, is what makes human beings properly human.

« ...[T]he desire for the object will be founded on a conception of its desirableness as a fulfilment of the capabilities of which a man is conscious in being conscious of himself. ... [Self-realization] will express itself in [the] imposition [...] of rules requiring something to be done irrespectively of any inclination to do it, irrespectively of any desired end to which it is a means, *other than this end, which is desired because conceived as absolutely desirable*<sup>34</sup>. »

## J. Rawls's critique of utilitarianism

Rawls, like T. H. Green and some of the British Idealists, started his philosophical inquiries from theology and, after losing his faith,<sup>35</sup> was in search of a non-naturalistic conception of welfare, capable of reforming contemporary democracies that he labelled with some degree of contempt 'market democracies' and that were based on the possessive individualism's view that « human society consists of a series of market relations... between sole proprietors ».

« In this conception of society separate individuals are thought of as so many different lines along which rights and duties are to be assigned and scarce means of satisfaction allocated in accordance with rules so as to give the

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<sup>32</sup> Mill J. S., *Utilitarianism* (1863), H.B. Acton (éd.), London, Everyman's Library, 1972, p. 54-55.

<sup>33</sup> Green T. H., *Prolegomena to Ethics*, 4<sup>th</sup> edition, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1899.

<sup>34</sup> Green T. H., *Prolegomena to Ethics*, *op. cit.*, §193, p. 229-230.

<sup>35</sup> Rawls J., *A Brief Inquiry into the Meaning of Sin and Faith*, T. Nagel (éd.), Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press, 2009.



greatest fulfilment of wants. The nature of the decision made by the ideal legislator is not, therefore, materially different from that of an entrepreneur deciding how to maximize his profit [...] or that of a consumer deciding on how to maximize his satisfaction<sup>36</sup>. »

There are various features of his critique of utilitarianism which I will not develop here<sup>37</sup>, but the one which is inspired by the ideal of *Bildung* is that utilitarianism fundamentally ignores the plasticity and the *developmental* nature of human interests:

« [Utilitarianism] takes men's propensities and inclinations as given, whatever they are, and then seek the best way to fulfill them<sup>38</sup>. »

Rawls sees this as the main flaw of utilitarianism and, more generally, of the economic conception of needs and welfare in capitalist societies. His critique is addressed to what he calls Welfare State capitalism<sup>39</sup> and its limited view of human needs and interests, aiming solely at « a decent minimum standard of living in which their basic needs are met », ignoring the need for self-development, for putting, « *from the outset*, in the hands of citizens generally, sufficient productive means to be fully cooperating members of society<sup>40</sup> ». The important idea, here, is that interests are not fixed, but develop all the time and that pre-distribution *ex ante*, not solely redistribution *ex post*, is needed for the development of human interests and capacities<sup>41</sup>. In Part III of *TJ*, Rawls is even clearer on the temporal or developmental dimension of human needs and interests when he presents his conception of the good and of human welfare. He analyses proper human interests as constituting *plans of life*, defined by higher-order purposes and aims, not simply by the search for instant satisfaction. Rawls mentions the influence of Royce's thought.

« A person may be regarded as a *human life* lived according to a plan. For Royce an individual says who he is by describing his *purposes* and causes, what he intends to do in his life<sup>42</sup>. A person's good is determined by what is for him the most rational *long-term plan of life* given reasonably favourable circumstances<sup>43</sup>. Royce uses the notion of a plan to characterize the coherent, systematic purposes of the individual, what makes him a conscious, unified moral person<sup>44</sup>. »

A person, then, may be regarded as properly human, not simply a thing, because of this ability to act intentionally, to develop and organize purposefully her interests and her

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<sup>36</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §5, p. 24.

<sup>37</sup> See *TJ* §6, p. 25-28 for a summary of his critiques: (1) that it sees the priority of justice only as a « socially useful illusion », (2) that it « does not take seriously the plurality and distinctness of individuals » (p. 26), (3) that it defines the good as simply « the greatest balance of satisfaction » without asking questions about their source or quality (p.27) and (4) that « it relies very heavily upon the natural facts and contingencies of human life » (p. 28).

<sup>38</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §6, p. 27.

<sup>39</sup> Rawls J., *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, *op. cit.*, §42, p. 139.

<sup>40</sup> Rawls J., *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, *op. cit.*, §42, p. 140 (my emphasis).

<sup>41</sup> On pre-distribution, see M. O'Neill & T. Williamson, *Property-Owning Democracy: Rawls and Beyond*, Oxford, Blackwell, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> *TJ* §63, p. 358 (my emphasis).

<sup>43</sup> *TJ* §15, p.79.

<sup>44</sup> *TJ* §63, p. 358, note 10.

objectives. This is a long way from the utilitarian approach of aggregate satisfaction as the *summum bonum*.

### Amartya Sen and the capability approach: a freedom-based conception of welfare

Like Rawls, the economist Amartya Sen is highly critical of the utilitarians and of a first principle of political economy that states that « agents are only motivated by their self-interest ». He calls Homo Economicus a « rational fool<sup>45</sup> ».

His critique of rational choice theory is based on a critique of « possessive individualism » and on an understanding of the Self as a developing being. In *Rationality and Freedom* as in *The Idea of Justice*, he rejects the « extremely limited understanding of reason and rationality » in favour of a distinction between « having reasons to choose something », on the one hand, and a capacity to project ends in a temporal horizon, on the other. The main point here is the ability to sustain the choice after scrutiny, that is, the *time-relevant* conception of rationality. But it is mostly in Sen's interpretation of *freedom* as a component of human wellbeing that we find the link with *self-development*.

« The process of choice itself is significant and individual advantage is judged in terms of the person's capability to do things she has reason to value. [...] The capability approach focuses on human life, and not just on some detached objects of conveniences, such as incomes or commodities that a person may possess<sup>46</sup>. »

Like Rawls and against resource-based or utility-based conceptions of the good, Sen is looking for a freedom-based approach, a way of understanding social justice in terms of the treatment of persons as free agents, in charge of their lives, not solely the distribution of goods. The developmental conception of persons is the answer to this concern for justice, which is perfectly expressed by Elizabeth Anderson, when she writes that,

« Justice should be considered as a relationship among people rather than merely as a pattern in the distribution of divisible goods [...] injustices may be better remedied by changing social norms and the structure of public goods than by redistributing resources<sup>47</sup>. »

### 3. The moral ambiguities of *Bildung*

Unfortunately, the appeal of the ideal of *Bildung* is tainted with moral ambiguities. As useful as the ideal appeared to Mill and others in the fight against « possessive individualism », it is a value fraught with difficulties. So far, we have avoided a central question, which is: why should self-development be a *good* thing? What about the « free » development of criminal anti-social impulses? What about the selfishness of self-development as exemplified by the behaviour of the « genius » or the *Übermensch*? Is self-development a good thing in itself, or only with respect to external values such as social progress, general utility, or human excellence? How should we argue for the morality of

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<sup>45</sup> Sen A., « Rational fools: a critique of the behavioural foundations of economic theory », *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, 6, 1977, and *Choice, Welfare and Measurement*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1982.

<sup>46</sup> Sen A., *The Idea of Justice*, London, Allen Lane, 2009, p. 231 and p. 233.

<sup>47</sup> Anderson E., « What is the Point of Equality? » in *Ethics*, vol. 109, n°2, 1999, p. 336.

self-development? How do we guarantee the fit between individual development and the concern for the good of others within the limits of justice?

### The Self and the Others: self-development as a moral ideal

The first difficulty of the ideal of self-development or self-realization concerns its moral limits, the reconciliation of the interests of the Self with the interests of Others. Enlightenment thinkers such as Adam Smith saw the answer in the assumption of a natural harmony of interests illustrated by the metaphor of the *invisible hand*, and for Montesquieu, « les passions compensatrices » and « le doux commerce » were key to pacifying conflicting interests. For Bentham, the answer lay in the role of the State and of various sanctions – legal, religious, etc. –, leading to the « artificial harmony of interests » as E. Halévy (1902) described it.

Mill's answer in *On Liberty* can be found in his Harm Principle:

« One very simple principle as entitled to govern absolutely the dealings of society with the individual in the way of compulsion and control [...] is that the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilised community, against his will, is to prevent harm to others. [...] The only part of the conduct of anyone, for which he is amenable to society, is that which concerns others. In the part which merely concerns himself, his independence is, of right, absolute. Over himself, over his own body and mind, the individual is sovereign<sup>48</sup>. »

However, the Harm Principle is subject to the criticism, presented among others by Henry Sidgwick, that it is very difficult to establish, in any human behaviour, the part that has harmful consequences for others. Another criticism is that the relation of the Self to others remains external and *instrumental* for Mill.

Instead, for T. H. Green's reading of Kant's Categorical Imperative and its universalistic demands, the self-development of the individual as a moral ideal necessarily includes concern for others and their own good as an *intrinsic* part of the individual's good. This was how he solved Sidgwick's and utilitarianism's fundamental *dilemma* between « egoistic hedonism » and « universalistic hedonism<sup>49</sup> ».

« That determination of an animal by a self-conscious principle, which makes a man and is presupposed by the interest in a permanent good, carries with it a certain appropriation by the man to himself of the beings with whom he is connected by natural ties, so that they become to him as himself and in providing for himself he provides for them. Projecting himself into the future as a permanent subject of possible well-being or ill-being – and he must so project himself in seeking for a permanent good – he associates his kindred with himself. It is this association that neutralises the effect which the anticipation of death must otherwise have on the demand for a permanent good<sup>50</sup>. »

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<sup>48</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 78.

<sup>49</sup> « A fundamental contradiction in Ethics cannot be avoided », Sidgwick H., *Methods of Ethics*, *op. cit.*, Concluding chapter.

<sup>50</sup> Green T. H., *Prolegomena to Ethics*, *op. cit.*, §231, p. 278.

Thus, Green thought he had succeeded, in the quest for a permanent and universal moral good, in reconciling the demands of the individual's development and that of her fellow citizens. This will become, with Green's successors<sup>51</sup>, the basis for a « new » social liberalism, freed from the difficulties of « possessive individualism » and persuaded, against both *laissez-faire* liberals and Marxists, that economic efficacy and social justice were compatible.

This is the context in which John Rawls developed his *Theory of justice* (1971). Following Green, Rawls thought that the developmental conception of the Self and of her abilities implied the relation between the Self and others as *constitutive*, not solely instrumental, as he showed in the Third Part of *TJ* where he argues for a conception of sociability and social union derived from what he labelled the Aristotelian Principle that he states as following:

« Human beings enjoy the exercise of their realized capacities (their innate or trained abilities), and this enjoyment increases the more the capacity is realised or the greater its complexity [...] and complex activities are more enjoyable<sup>52</sup>. »

However, this enjoyment of our developed capacities is impossible without the contribution of others, and the « social nature of mankind<sup>53</sup> » is inseparable from this vision of the individual person as self-development:

« We need one another as partners in ways of life that are engaged in for their own sake and the successes and enjoyments of others are necessary for and complementary to our own good [...] Rational plans of life normally provide for the development of at least some of a person's powers. The Aristotelian Principle points in this direction. Yet one basic characteristic of human beings is that no one person can do everything that he might do [...] ».

« Thus, we may say following Humboldt that it is through social union founded upon the needs and potentialities of its members that each person can participate in the total sum of the realized natural assets of the others. We are led to the notion of the community of humankind<sup>54</sup>. »

And Rawls concluded his demonstration in the following way:

« Persons need one another since it is only in active cooperation that one's powers reach fruition. *Only in a social union is an individual complete.*<sup>55</sup> »

Self-development is then a social process, not in the sense that it is fully conditioned by external socio-economic factors, but that it needs interpersonal as well as intrapersonal inputs. This is why Rawls uses the expression « social union » to describe the social

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<sup>51</sup> Green died at a relatively young age but had an enormous influence on philosophers such as Leonard T. Hobhouse (*Liberalism*, 1911, *Development and Purpose*, 1913), liberal politicians such as Lloyd George, leading to the birth of the Welfare State in Great Britain (1906-1911), economists such as Alfred Marshall and J. M. Keynes, as well as on the Labour party and the Fabian Society. On Green's legacy, see Kloppenberg J., *Uncertain victory*, *op. cit.*, p. 305-311.

<sup>52</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §63, p. 364 and §65, p. 374.

<sup>53</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §79, p. 458.

<sup>54</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §79, p. 458-459.

<sup>55</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §79, note 4, p. 460 (my emphasis).

structure that is at work in helping the development of the Self and of her capacities, to distance it from any social determinism as well as from the illusions of the purely individualistic view of society as « private society ». One first conclusion is that the conception of the Self as a developing being and of this process as a *social* process defeats selfishness and « possessive individualism » and opens the way for a different view of liberal individualism that is compatible with, and even needs, social justice, in keeping with T. H. Green's legacy as we have seen.

### *Bildung* and perfectionism: self-development as a democratic ideal

However, the difficulty remains of the potentially non-democratic nature of *Bildung*, a difficulty of which Rawls is perfectly aware. The question of *perfectionism*, of the sacrifice of the masses for the development of the genius, of superior specimens of humanity was very much present in the literature Rawls used at the time and the influence of John Dewey's anti-perfectionism is obvious. Rawls is perfectly clear what interpretation of *Bildung* he favours:

« It is important not to confuse the idea of social union with the high value put upon human diversity and individuality as found in Mill's *On Liberty* [...] and in German Romanticism [...] or with the conception of the good as the harmonious fulfillment of natural powers by (complete) individuals; nor, finally, with gifted individuals, artists, and statesmen, and so on, achieving this for the rest of mankind<sup>56</sup>. »

Taking the examples of art and science and culture generally as cooperative enterprises, he writes:

« In line with the rejection of the principle of perfection and the acceptance of democracy in the assessment of one another's excellences, they have no special merit from the standpoint of justice<sup>57</sup>. »

In his latest book, *Political Liberalism* (1993), Rawls advances an even more fundamental reason for rejecting perfectionism and any interpretation of self-development as the development of human excellence. Such a view, in effect, would contradict the pluralistic nature of democratic political societies as envisaged by liberalism:

« A modern democratic society is characterized not simply by a pluralism of comprehensive religious, philosophical and moral doctrines but by a pluralism of incompatible yet reasonable comprehensive doctrines [...] the normal result of the exercise of human reason within the framework of the free institutions of a constitutional democratic regime<sup>58</sup>. »

Any dominant conception of the good would limit both this diversity of options, favoured by Mill in *On Liberty* as central for free societies<sup>59</sup> and, most importantly, the basic equal freedoms granted to all by a liberal democratic regime. To that, one could add that such a

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<sup>56</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §79, p. 460, note 4.

<sup>57</sup> Rawls J., *TJ* §79, p. 462.

<sup>58</sup> Rawls J., *Political Liberalism*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty*, *op. cit.*, Chapter II.

dominance itself would defeat the very nature of self-development which, as Mill put it, needs pluralism, freedom to choose and the recognition that:

« Mankind are greater gainers by suffering each other to live as seems good to themselves, than by compelling each to live as seems good to the rest<sup>60</sup>. »

But such a view was not present from the start. Mill himself was torn between two interpretations of *Bildung*. Like the Romantics, his emphasis on individuality means that « authentic » or « true » self-development is a creation similar to the *creative* process that produces a work of art. This is an elitist and perfectionist model of self-development, which is pregnant in the young Marx as well as in Humboldt and Mill<sup>61</sup>. As well as being an unachievable goal, except for a minority, the Romantic vision implies that only the « hyperself », the superior being, is capable of creating herself without any outside help. In Nietzschean terms, to shape oneself freely like a work of art, ignoring the pressures of reality and of material constraints, the demands of society and of moral norms, to be the creator of one's own means of development as well as one's aims, is claimed to be the « true » meaning of freedom. One such view can be found in Thomas Mann and in his emphasis on interiority and true autonomy<sup>62</sup>. In contrast, a majority of sub-human beings remain the mere recipients of means for survival. Self-affirmation is the privilege of the strong against the herd. This is an ideal that cannot be realised unless the needs and rights of others are trampled upon. If it is understood in this sense, it does not make space for social responsibility and the role played by others in one's own achievements. It is a-moral and a-political in a dangerous way.

But Mill was also attracted to the ideal of self-development as a *natural* and spontaneous process. The question is how autonomous this is. Some will insist that self-development is a process that should not be interfered with. The Self is defined as possessing both actual and potential properties. These potential properties are innate and apparently dormant, but develop according to a natural process that is, as Mill puts it, comparable to « the growth of a tree »:

« Human nature is not a machine to be built after a model and set to do exactly the work prescribed for it, but a tree, which requires to grow and develop itself on all sides, according to the tendency of the inward forces which make it a living thing<sup>63</sup>. »

Unfortunately, the metaphor is ambiguous. If abilities and talents are seen as a « given », as naturally or genetically distributed among human beings, then, the resulting inequalities will be seen as justified and « natural » and only an authoritarian arbitrary power would be able to redress such a natural distribution. However, if the metaphor is that *the self itself is a process* which external interventions can support and enhance in yielding better results, as the natural environment (the forest) does for the tree, then, we

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<sup>60</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty, op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 80.

<sup>61</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty, op. cit.*, ch.III, p. 133-134: « I insist thus emphatically on the importance of genius, and the necessity of allowing it to unfold itself freely both in thought and in practice [...] In sober truth, whatever homage may be professed, or even paid, to real or supposed mental superiority, the general tendency of things throughout the world is to render mediocrity the ascendant power among mankind ».

<sup>62</sup> Mann T., *Reden und Aufsätze, op. cit.*, see note 4.

<sup>63</sup> Mill J. S., *On Liberty, op. cit.*, Introduction, p. 75.

should understand self-development according to the ecological model, as a result of the collaborative efforts of mankind and nature, the *Umwelt*.

Commenting on Mill's metaphor and on T. H. Green's ideal self in his 1893 paper on Self-Realization<sup>64</sup>, John Dewey shows how the dangers of perfectionism are rooted in a vision of the self as pre-existing her achievements which are measured against this fixed pre-existing ideal self:

« [There is] a difficulty which everyone has felt in one way or another in the self-realization theory. In the ordinary conception of the presupposed self, that self is already there as a fixed fact, even though it be as an eternal self [...] instead of holding the self open for instruction; – instead, that is, of finding the self in the activity called by the situation [...] It is not action *for* the self that is required (thus setting up a fixed self which is simply going to get something more, wealth, pleasure, morality or whatever), but action *as* the self<sup>65</sup>. »

T. H. Green too tried to answer that question and he too was ambiguous, but in the other direction. He embraced a form of perfectionism that identified the human good with self-realization and attaining the perfection of our nature as moral persons and agents. But self-realization must also reflect the way in which individuals participate in associations and communities and, as a result, must reflect the impersonal demand that individuals pursue a common good. In articulating this conception of perfectionism, Green saw himself as synthesizing the best elements in two different ethical traditions – Greek eudaimonism and Kantian rationalism, a very ambitious programme.

However, in spite of these ambiguities, Green's ethics of self-realization exerted a powerful influence on his politics and contributed to the emergence of a « new » social liberalism and the beginnings of the modern Welfare State. He insisted on the role of the State (but not the nation) in controlling individual preferences and making sure that « the right to free life » is enabled positively as essentially a moral capacity, a capacity for freely contributing to the social good, not for selfish development. The state has a duty to promote the common good, and individual rights in the end have to be constrained by the common good. This gives the state not just *negative* duties to refrain from interfering with the freedoms and opportunities of its citizens, as in the case of the Millian Harm Principle, but also *positive* duties to provide resources and opportunities for individual self-realization, hence the justification for a future Welfare state. The ethical and political demand for self-realization, Green thought, defined a *positive* conception of freedom, not solely a *negative* one as for Mill<sup>66</sup>. He thus laid the philosophical foundations for a new form of liberalism that transcended the *laissez-faire* ideology characteristic of 19<sup>th</sup> century British liberalism: the "new" social liberalism<sup>67</sup>.

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<sup>64</sup> See Dewey J., « Self-realization and The Moral Ideal », *op. cit.*, p. 653, for an illuminating discussion of the metaphor of the growing tree where he notes that « the notion which I wish to criticize is that of the self as a presupposed fixed *schema* or outline, while realization consists in the filling of this *schema* [...] any theory which makes the self something to be realized [...] which does not make it a reality as specific and concrete as a growing tree or a moving planet, must in one form or another, set up a rigid self, and conceive of realization as filling up its empty framework ».

<sup>65</sup> Dewey J., « Self-realization and The Moral Ideal », *op. cit.*, p. 661-662.

<sup>66</sup> For a discussion of these two conceptions of freedom, see the famous essay by Isaiah Berlin, « Two Concepts of Liberty » in Berlin I., *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, p. 118-172, as well as in the same volume, « John Stuart Mill and The Ends of Life », *Ibid.*, p. 173-206.

<sup>67</sup> On the "new" liberalism, see Michael Freedman, *op. cit.*

## Conclusion: The emergence of a « new » social liberalism

What is remarkable in the history of the influence of *Bildung* in the Anglo-American context is that it has followed a non-perfectionist and egalitarian path and has led in part to the emergence of a « new » social liberalism.

As we have seen, for Mill as well as for T. H. Green, Dewey, Rawls, or Sen, far from being an autonomous natural process or an individual creation or a mere adaptation to the context, self-development is a *social* and *interpersonal* process in the sense that as developing beings, we need each other even if we are not fully aware of it. This is what E. Durkheim and L. Bourgeois called the « fact of solidarity »<sup>68</sup>.

My first conclusion, then, is that the conception of the Self as a developing being and of that process as a *social* process defeats selfishness and opens the way for a different view of liberal individualism that is compatible with, and even needs, the institutions of social justice. As John Rawls writes,

« Those institutions must, from the outset, put in the hands of citizens generally, and not only of a few, sufficient productive means for them to be fully cooperating members of society on a footing of equality [...] human as well as real capital, knowledge, and an understanding of institutions, educated abilities and trained skills [...] under these conditions we hope that an underclass will not exist<sup>69</sup>. »

The second conclusion I would like to draw is that this reinterpretation of the Self as activity, as a progressive and developing being, has consequences for the Welfare State itself and should reshape its social policies. In particular, the demand for freedom and responsibility for one's own ends should come to the forefront of social justice, avoiding as much as possible the « undue reliance on assistance<sup>70</sup> ». This leads Rawls, for instance, to a critique of what he calls « Welfare State capitalism » and its emphasis on assistance as, for him,

« The idea is not simply to assist those who lose out through accidents and misfortunes (although this must be done) but instead to put all citizens in a position to manage their own affairs and to take part in social cooperation on a footing of mutual respect under appropriately equal conditions<sup>71</sup>. »

Similarly, Amartya Sen's capability approach as « a freedom-centred understanding of economics and of the process of development as an agent-oriented view »<sup>72</sup> is highly critical of social interventions focused solely on the redistribution of resources, whereas resources without the ability to transform them into utilities, without *agency*, are insufficient for wellbeing. As he writes in *Development as Freedom*,

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<sup>68</sup> On Léon Bourgeois's « solidarism », see Kloppenberg J. T., *Uncertain Victory*, Oxford, 1986, and on Emile Durkheim's « organic solidarity », see Lukes S., *Emile Durkheim*, London, 1973.

<sup>69</sup> Rawls J., *Justice as Fairness: A Restatement*, *op. cit.*, §42, p. 140.

<sup>70</sup> Mill J. S., *Principles of Political Economy*, 1848, V, XI, §13: « The problem to be solved is therefore one of peculiar subtlety as well as importance; how to give the greatest amount of needful help, with the smallest encouragement to undue reliance on it ».

<sup>71</sup> Rawls J., *TJ*, p. 15.

<sup>72</sup> Sen A., *Development as Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p. 11.



« societal arrangements should be investigated in terms of their contribution to enhancing and guaranteeing the substantive freedoms of individuals, seen as active agents of change, rather than passive recipients of dispensed benefits<sup>73</sup> ».

Both J. Rawls and A. Sen, as J. S. Mill, T. H. Green, J. Dewey before them, are then highly critical, as we have seen, in the name of the *liberal* value of freedom, of a conception of social justice that treats individuals mainly as consumers of benefits, not as agents of their own life and self-developing beings, and that fails to support a *temporal horizon* of choices and opportunities against which the Self can project herself and develop her potential as freely as possible. But *this horizon of choices is not pre-existent*, as Dewey correctly insisted. We have seen that self-development cannot be understood simply in terms of a natural gradual process. Nor can opportunities be understood simply as mere good « luck ». They become « events » or « turning points » only if the individual has the capacity, nurtured by social measures, to seize them and the hope to transform them, as expressed by Schiller's dictum, « *immer wird, nie ist* ». This is one of the main lessons for liberalism of the Romantic ideal of self-development and of the conception of the Self understood not in terms of « having », as in "possessive individualism", but of « being », as the young Marx would have said<sup>74</sup>.

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<sup>73</sup> Sen A., *Development as Freedom*, *op. cit.*, p. 13.

<sup>74</sup> « The less you *are*, the less you express your own life, the more you *have*, i.e., the greater is your *alienated* life, the greater is the store of your estranged being. » (Marx K., *1844 Manuscripts*, Third Manuscript, p. 51)