

COMMENTARY

THE POLITICS OF SELF-DEVELOPMENT

C.B. Macpherson

The novel point argued in "Liberal Still, Notes on the Political Theory of C.B. Macpherson" is that I have overlooked a third liberal ontology, different from both the two that I have found counterposed within the liberal tradition, i.e. the individual as maximizer of utilities (Hobbes to Bentham) and as exerter and developer of his/her human capacities, or maximizer of powers (J.S. Mill). The third concept is described as one which defines persons as "bearers of rights with an equal capacity for autonomy or independence" (p. 8, para. 2); it is also called "the juridical version of the liberal ontology" (p. 11, para. 2). This concept is quite evidently incompatible with a utilitarianism which subordinates individual rights to maximum aggregate utility of the whole society. But how different is it from the concept of the individual as exerter and developer of his/her human capacities?

The author allows "that Mill does not usually make a very clear distinction between these two aspects of freedom" (p. 9, para. 2), but insists that "Mill would have been unwilling to use the concept of freedom as self-development to determine when individual autonomy was or was not a good thing" (*ibid.*). He quotes the ringing assertion in *On Liberty*: "That the only purpose for which power can rightfully be exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his own will, is to prevent harm to others. His own good, either physical or moral, is not a sufficient warrant." He does not quote Mill's opening endorsement of Humboldt's equally ringing assertion: "The grand, leading principle, towards which every argument unfolded in these pages directly converges, is the absolute and essential importance of human development in its richest diversity."

The author appears to be arguing that Mill would have the individual free to develop him/herself *or not*. Yet only if we considered the negative liberty claimed in the first of these passages to be Mill's unqualified position, and neglected his belief in the essential importance of human development, could we say that he would leave the individual free to be a self-developer or not.

The question whether Mill gave priority to negative freedom or to self-development (or whether he was simply inconsistent in holding them equally essential) is, I think, less important than the question whether we can hope to overcome the unfreedoms of our present class-divided liberal-democratic societies without giving priority to the concept of self-development. I think that

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we cannot, and I am not sure whether my critic agrees with me on this. His differences with me are perhaps only due to our addressing somewhat different problems. He is looking for an intellectually satisfying abstract principle: I am looking for a practical principle on which one can base a move to a more human society.

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