

# QUESTIONING SPINOZA ON POSITIVE FREEDOM

## A reconstruction of the Berlin-West Debate

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Spinoza's political philosophy is generally considered a cornerstone of modern liberalism, for it promotes a democratic system in which the warranty of tolerance and freedom should not just be ensured *a posteriori* by the state, but represents the proper purpose whereby the commonwealth itself is established. Nonetheless, in his examination of the concepts of positive and negative freedom, Isaiah Berlin recognized in the author of the *Theological-Political Treatise* the germ of a possible authoritarian and paternalistic drift, due to his consideration of political freedom in the former sense. In response to this accusation, in a 1993 article appeared on *Political Studies*, professor David West argued in favour of a softer consideration for Spinoza's politics. Analysing the Spinozian notion of positive freedom in a broader sense (namely, enriching it with some moral and ontological considerations drawn from *Ethics*) he gets to sustain that it doesn't necessarily lead to the tyrannical paternalism which Berlin generally associates to rationalist political theories, like those of Plato, Hegel, Fichte and Marx. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the debate, examining both the Berlin-West crosstalk and the political chapters of the *Treatise* in order to understand whether and to which extent Spinoza's accusation is justified.

Keywords: Spinoza, Isaiah Berlin, David West, Positive Freedom, Liberalism, Rationality.

### 1. Berlin's account on Positive Freedom

Isaiah Berlin's critique of Spinoza's politics is to be framed in a broader reflection, whose results mature in the composition of *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), one of the most famous and fecund contribution to the XX century political thinking. In his inaugural lecture at the Oxford University (which will later be published as a pamphlet) Berlin is interested in defining the concept of political freedom; a notion which the author himself considers «protean»<sup>1</sup> and, nonetheless, worthy of examination. Being

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), in *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1969, p. 121.

far from his intentions to retrace the whole amount of meanings that the concept has assumed throughout human history, Berlin proposes to examine «no more than two of these senses»<sup>2</sup>:

The first of these political senses of freedom or liberty, [...] which (following much precedent) I shall call the ‘negative’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question “What is the area within which the subject – a person or group of persons – is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons?”. The second, which I shall call the ‘positive’ sense, is involved in the answer to the question “What, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”. The two questions are clearly different, even though the answers to them may overlap.<sup>3</sup>

From this point on, Berlin’s explanation focuses on the aforementioned senses of liberty, considering both their conceptual extension and their historical development. Being this paper devoted to the specific Spinozian issue, the notion of negative freedom will not be taken into consideration, unless it would be necessary to define its counterpart. Moreover, the positive sense of liberty is the main concern of the author too.

To avoid misunderstandings, it is necessary to make clear that Berlin has no intention of delegitimizing the positive conception of liberty at all: «negative and positive liberty» he says «are both perfectly valid concepts».<sup>4</sup> The deeply critical considerations reserved to the latter in *Two Concepts of Liberty* solely aim to warn about the possible dangers that its rhetorical abuse can get to justify. In fact, although the metamorphosis of a question regarding freedom in an answer adopting obedience may seem strange, the concern for such a problem is not new: just as Benjamin Constant was concerned with the ancient absorption of individual rights in the participation to collective power<sup>5</sup>, Berlin worries about the possible absorption of individual freedom in the collective will.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ivi*, pp. 121-122.

<sup>4</sup> Ramin JAHANBEGLOO, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, Peter Halban, London 1992, p. 41.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin CONSTANT, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns* (1819), in B. FONTANA (ed.), *Constant: Political Writings*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1988, pp. 309-328.

<sup>6</sup> Philipp PETITT, *The Instability of Freedom as Noninterference: the case of Isaiah Berlin*, «Ethics», n. 4, 2011, p. 715.

It is not the Athenian democracy, nor the ideal Spinozian Commonwealth, what Berlin had in mind in harshly criticizing the positive notion of freedom, rather the French Terror and the Russian Tyranny,<sup>7</sup> whose histories clearly succeed to show that he who endorses such freedom might end up backfiring his own intents.

### 1.1. Transitions

In examining and criticizing the positive concept of freedom, Berlin appeals to a sizable number of figures, whose moral and political thesis share a common rationalist approach. Plato, the Stoics, Spinoza, Kant, Hegel, Fichte and Marx – the author writes – commonly agree with the idea that true freedom «derives from the wish of part of the individual to be his own master».<sup>8</sup> Such a definition seems reasonably compatible to its negative counterpart, where liberty is to be conceived as the Hobbesian absence of impediment:<sup>9</sup> if no one prevents or coerces me – we may say – I am the master of my actions. Nevertheless, the core of freedom in its positive sense results from a kind of conceptual development that, implicitly or explicitly, underlies the theories of its defenders.

Such process is described by Berlin as consistent of three main transitions. If we want “myself” to be the answer of “who controls my action?”, we shall first become aware of the external forces which constrain the individual in a state of passivity. Asking ourselves, «may I not [...] be a slave to nature? Or to my own 'unbridled' passions?»,<sup>10</sup> we become aware of the limits of our freedom and the obstacles to overcome. In order to achieve liberty, we must liberate from what is not dependent solely on ourselves – How? Discovering a stronger, independent part of us, capable of ignoring external influences and dominate over our passionate side. In Berlin’s words, this revelation is defined as *independent momentum*:<sup>11</sup>

Have not men had the experience of liberating themselves from spiritual slavery, or slavery to nature, and do they not in the course of it become aware, on the one hand, of

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<sup>7</sup> Marshall COHEN, *Berlin and the Liberal Tradition*, «The Philosophical Quarterly», n. 40, 1960, p. 227.

<sup>8</sup> *Ivi*, p. 131.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas HOBBS, *Leviathan* (1651), in N. MALCOLM (ed.), *Thomas Hobbes: Leviathan*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2012, Chapter XXI.

<sup>10</sup> BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty*, p. 132.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*.

a self which dominates, and, on the other, of something in them which is brought to heel? This dominant self is then variously identified with reason, with my 'higher nature', with the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my 'real', or 'ideal', or 'autonomous' self, or with myself 'at its best'.<sup>12</sup>

Reason, then, is the path for liberty. Once the individual has found his 'true' self and abandoned the sway of passions, reason becomes the only ruler. From this point on, no external coercion or affection can be effective, because the law to follow in order to achieve personal fulfilment is a self-imposed one.

After this first 'moral' transition, two more are to follow. Switching from a strictly individual to a social perspective, they finally get to the political terrain, and thus represent the very breakthrough of Berlin's discourse.

The second transition consists in conceiving the 'true', rational self which the *independent momentum* allowed to discover as a collective entity, as «something wider than the individual [...], as a social 'whole' of which the individual is an element or aspect: a tribe, a race, a Church, a State, the great society of the living and the dead and the yet unborn».<sup>13</sup>

It seems normal, or at least plausible, to conceive the self within a community. No individual, for how 'rational' he may be, can live away from society – or it would not sound very rational to do otherwise. Nonetheless, the complete absorption of the individual in a collective entity leads us to glimpse the danger of paternalism that Berlin fears so much. In fact, the third and last transition towards the authoritarian "short-circuit" of positive freedom sets out from such an organic metaphor to justify «the coercion of some men by others in order to raise them to a 'higher' level of freedom».<sup>14</sup>

If the only path to freedom is reason, and reason (that's assumed) is basically available for everyone, still some individual would be smarter than others (that is empirically evident) and thus capable of guiding the more ignorant, irrational and passionate members of society towards their 'true' freedom, since they cannot achieve it alone. Even though a similar situation may annoy us, we will not hesitate to give it a sort of plausibility, since we can easily conceive that «it is possible, and at times justifiable, to coerce men in the name of some goal (let us say, justice or public health)

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibidem.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibidem.*

which they would, if they were more enlightened, themselves pursue, but do not, because they are blind or ignorant or corrupt».<sup>15</sup>

## 1.2. Fictions and Nightmares

If we now summon up the third transition of the positive notion of freedom and consider it together with the earlier ones, its definitive, displeasing aspects eventually emerge. Given that a) there's one and only way for the individual to behave freely and reach happiness (i.e. reason) and b) the 'true' self must be identified as a collective entity, whose rational interests can 'correct' the merely individual, empirical ones; it follows that c) coerce the individuals in order to achieve 'higher' purposes may be justified, because a rational, wiser lawgiver may understand their 'true' interests better than they do. Moreover, such a coercion must not be considered as «tyranny, but liberation»<sup>16</sup>; for across obedience the 'true' self is acting according to reason, that is to liberty.

To our ears, and Berlins' too, such an outcome does not seem acceptable anymore. In a liberal society the individual must be free to decide how to behave and what to believe (as long as the same freedom is guaranteed to the others), no matter the liberation from passions and impulses, nor the 'rational goal' of the society or the universe, nor the imposition of any 'virtuous' model of good life. Since they conceive a rational strategy for the practice of self-fulfilment and a harmonic solution to the problem of common life (something like: whether all the individuals are, or become, rational, then their interests won't collide with one another) all the 'rationalist theorist of politics' tend to betray this liberal assumption, mothering a

monstrous impersonation, which consists in equating what X would choose if he were something he is not, or at least not yet, with what X actually seeks and chooses.<sup>17</sup>

If we want to avoid this insidious situation – Berlin concludes – the positive notion of freedom is to be submitted to the negative one, if not to be rejected at all. Plato's

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<sup>15</sup> *Ivi*, p. 133.

<sup>16</sup> «Freedom is not freedom to do what is irrational, or stupid, or wrong. To force empirical selves into the right pattern is no tyranny, but liberation». *Ivi*, p.148.

<sup>17</sup> *Ivi*, p. 133.

Republic, Hegel's ethical State and Marx's communist tyranny should sweep away with it; and, apparently, Spinoza's commonwealth too.

## 2. Replies and Retorts

Opening the second volume of *Political Studies* XLI (1993), the reader can come upon a fifteen-page section named *Debate*, within which David West's *Spinoza on Positive Freedom* and Isaiah Berlin's *A Reply to David West* deal with our specific problem. Introducing the examination of liberty in the Dutchman thinker, West begins his article illustrating the aforementioned conceptual evolution (together with the consequent authoritarian drift) of the positive notion of freedom in the political philosophy of Hegel and Marx. The result of the inquiry is a solid confirm to the thesis of *Two Concepts of Liberty*, which besides the author rephrases discomposing «the syndrome which Berlin attributes to the positive conception of freedom» in «three different claims»<sup>18</sup>, whose order reflects the transitional process carried on by Berlin himself. Here they follow:

1. The *thesis of positive freedom* «refers to the claim that the freedom to do one's will does not guarantee the freedom of that will or the authenticity of one's wants».<sup>19</sup> It is not difficult to recognize in this claim the 'independent momentum' cited above: if not accompanied by an adequate rational awareness, a 'voluntary' action toward an 'authentic' goal may prove not to be such, because of the heteronomous factors that could influence both its motive and its purpose.
2. The *thesis of the reified self*. According to this claim, «the self is reified to the extent that it is regarded as an object of knowledge which can be known, in principle, as well or better by a person other than that self».<sup>20</sup> In this case, is the 'paternalistic' transition to come forward. As we have seen, by accepting a rationalistic model of self-fulfilment the possibility of knowing one's utility better than the subject itself becomes conceivable, and the coercion for his 'true' interest justified.

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<sup>18</sup> David WEST, *Spinoza on Positive Freedom*, «Political Studies», XLI, 1993, p. 288.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibidem*.

3. Finally, the *thesis of the social self* «identifies the true or authentic self with a social or collective entity (“a tribe, a race, a church, a state”)». Once this identification has been made, «it becomes possible to suppose that the true interests of the members of the organically conceived society are more reliably ascertained by the philosophical observer, the leader or the priest, by the revolutionary hero or the party intellectual».<sup>21</sup>

Thus, what is significant in Berlin’s critique of positive freedom paradigms «is that the ‘true’ self is identified in such a way that the views of someone other than the self become authoritative».<sup>22</sup> David West’s challenge is, then, to demonstrate that such claims and conclusion cannot apply to Baruch Spinoza’s ethics and politics.

## 2.1. Do Not Throw the Baby Out with the Bath Water

David West’s article does not intend to demonstrate the falseness nor the inconsistency of Isaiah Berlin’s thesis, but rather aims to rescue Spinoza’s notion of political liberty from the charge carried out in *Two Concepts of Liberty*. In the introductory paragraph, the author himself claims:

I shall argue that Berlin’s account is only partly justified. It is largely justified in the case of both Hegel and Marx who can with some justice be interpreted as philosophers of ‘objective reason’. [...] By contrast, Spinoza’s account of human freedom differs in two crucial respects from the syndrome identified by Berlin. In the first place, Spinoza’s metaphysical monism and his account of individual *conatus* render implausible the rationalist assumption of a single, correct way of life. Secondly, the account of positive freedom which Spinoza builds on this metaphysical foundation does not encourage the despotic impersonation which so worries Berlin.<sup>23</sup>

If we read this lines in light of the earlier tripartite distinction of Berlin’s argument, we will easily recognize that West’s purpose is nothing more than demonstrate the impossibility to apply the second (*thesis of the reified self*) and the third (*thesis of the social self*) Berlin’s claim to Spinoza’s political philosophy; that is, precisely, to argue that ‘rational political theories’ are not all the same.

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>23</sup> *Ivi*, p.285.

## 2.2. Rejecting the ‘Reified Self’

There is no need to say that Spinoza can be easily regarded as an admirer of positive freedom. In the *Ethics* – as well as in the *Theological-Political Treatise* – the assumption according to which rational knowledge can bring to freedom is highly recurrent and evident. In both works, Berlin’s *independent momentum* is to be necessarily achieved, for otherwise the individual will be continuously constrained by external affections and passions. «In Spinoza’s system» West comments «rationality or understanding is not merely a symptom of freedom, but also a mean of attaining it. The improvement of the understanding is a form of emancipation».<sup>24</sup> Comprehending the necessary course of the universe – which binds unrestrictedly both natural and human realm – the wiseman won’t be afraid of ‘sad’ passions nor hopeful for the ‘joyful’ ones, due to the knowledge of their causes and the awareness of their nature.

In conceiving positive freedom not much as an «outright *mastery* of the passions by reason»<sup>25</sup>, but rather as an intellectual effort to «free [...] from subjection to those influences which are transient and variable»<sup>26</sup>, Spinoza might suggest that there is nothing like *one and only* rational path to go along with in order to reach happiness, but possibly that the only way to understand what makes the individual really happy or not is a rational one. This ‘instrumental’ characterization of reason is fundamental for West’s rejection of the *thesis of the reified self* in Spinoza’s position, for it goes hand in hand with the ontological account of the individual emerging from the *Ethics*.

The impossibility of regarding the self «as an object of knowledge which can be known [...] as well or better by a person other than the self»<sup>27</sup> lays on the Spinozian thesis whereby the essential nature of any individual thing is to be identified with its very individuality and its power of self-maintenance in relation to other things.<sup>28</sup> According to the ontological system of the *Ethics*, something like a ‘human essence’ whose *summum bonum* can be achieved behaving virtuously or exercising reason does

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<sup>24</sup> *Ivi*, p.293.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>26</sup> *Ivi*, p.294.

<sup>27</sup> *Ivi*, p.288.

<sup>28</sup> *Ivi*, p.292.

not exist.<sup>29</sup> Every individual is indissolubly bound to his proper *conatus*<sup>30</sup> and to that alone, and since «the only *effective* understanding [of true virtue] is one inextricably linked to [this] individual will or *conatus*», the way to persist in his own existence and achieve self-fulfilment cannot be neither taught nor learned – all the more imposed. Then, West continues, given that «no such universal standard of behaviour can be derived from Spinoza’s definition of *individual* essence»<sup>31</sup>, it follows that

There can be no paternalistic justification for attempting to *impose* understanding on the individual, because such an imposition can only increase the passivity of the one subjected to it and must inevitably fail to encourage the practice of her self-understanding.<sup>32</sup>

The connection between the notion of individuality and the emancipatory role of reason now reappears in a clearer form: he who tries to impose a rule of rational government to any individual – how perfect would it be – in order to make him free, is completely backfiring his intents by submitting his target to a heteronomous, coercive factor. In fact

Virtue, like freedom, is understood as the optimal realization of *the individual’s* ‘endeavour to persist in its own being’ [...] Our understanding of ethics is inseparable from the process in which we become more active in relation to our ‘affections’, the process in which we become genuinely free.<sup>33</sup>

We finally see that – in the Spinozian system – the attempt to reify an individual in order to pursue his ‘true’ or ‘higher’ interests is not only unjust<sup>34</sup>, but even impossible. His goals and interests, as well as his growth in the liberation from passions, cannot be known *a priori* by anyone, because they reflect a dialogue of himself with himself. That’s why the aim of the commonwealth is not to change or educate men, but rather

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<sup>29</sup> Cf. West’s juxtaposition of Aristotle and Spinoza. *Ibidem*.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Baruch SPINOZA, *Ethics* (1677), in George H. R. PARKINSON (ed.), *Spinoza: Ethics*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 2000, III, propp.6-7: «Everything, in so far as it is in itself, endeavours to persist in its own being [...]. The endeavour, wherewith everything endeavours to persist in its own being is nothing else but the actual essence of the thing in question».

<sup>31</sup> WEST, *Spinoza on Positive Freedom*, p. 292.

<sup>32</sup> *Ivi*, p. 295.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem* (emphasis mine).

<sup>34</sup> As we shall demonstrate in § 2.3, dealing with Spinoza’s politics.

«to allow their minds and their bodies to develop in their own ways in security and enjoy the free use of reason».<sup>35</sup>

### 2.3. Rejecting the ‘Social Self’

To deal with the third claim of Berlin’s critique of positive freedom, David West moves from the ontological and moral level towards a strictly political one. Consequently, the primal referential work of Spinoza now becomes the *Theological-Political Treatise*. This ‘hell-forged’ book,<sup>36</sup> published anonymously in 1670, is principally concerned with the defence of freedom of thought and speech; a liberty which, as written in the frontpage of the book, «can be allowed in preserving Piety and the Peace of the Republic: but also that it is not [...] to be upheld except when accompanied by the Peace of the Republic and Piety Themselves»<sup>37</sup>. As we have just seen, a ‘moral’ notion of positive liberty may be interpreted as the possibility to develop one’s reason in order to achieve his self-fulfilment in the appropriate way. If we then imagine transposing this concept into a political frame, it is not difficult to draw the Spinozian conclusion that a rightful state is bounded to the necessity of preserving (possibly enriching) the domain of free rational exercise.

However, things are not so easy, and a cursory reading of the political sections of the *Treatise* may induce us to agree with Isaiah Berlin’s accusation. Where Spinoza, in the beginning of Chapter 16, examines the foundation of the state, an insidious heritage immediately comes into sight. In order to «live in security and so far as that is possible without fear»<sup>38</sup>, he writes, men in a natural state should abandon their unrestricted natural rights (i.e. the unconditional right to take for themselves by any means what they believe to be useful for them) and put them in a common with the subscription of a contract. As had been theorized twenty years before in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, individual safety and enrichment are considered possible only into the walls of the state, but they will be granted under one and simple condition: to offer absolute obedience

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<sup>35</sup> Baruch SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise* (1670), edited by J. ISRAEL & M. SILVERTHORNE Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 2007, p. 252.

<sup>36</sup> Steven NADLER, *A Book Forged in Hell: Spinoza’s Scandalous Treatise and the Birth of the Secular Age*, Princeton University Press, Princeton 2011.

<sup>37</sup> SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 1 (original frontpage).

<sup>38</sup> *Ivi*, p. 197.

to the sovereign power.<sup>39</sup> Even though Spinoza suggests that its best distribution would be a democratic one, there is no comfort in reading something like this:

It follows that the sovereign power is bound by no law and everyone is obliged to obey it in all things. For they must all have made this agreement, tacitly or explicitly, when they transferred their whole power of defending themselves, that is, their whole right, to sovereign authority. [...] It follows that unless we wish to be enemies of government and to act against reason, which urges us to defend the government with all our strength, we are obliged to carry out absolutely all the commands of the sovereign power, however absurd they may be.<sup>40</sup>

Stopping our consideration of Spinoza's politics at this point would be not only superficial, but even disrespectful of the general scheme of the *Treatise*. On the other hand, to examine in full the dialectic between individual freedom and the duty of obedience towards the commonwealth would lead us too far from our point. Therefore, together with David West's argument, we will now directly skip to Chapters 17 and 20 of the *Treatise*, where the submission of individual rights and the warranty of positive freedom seem to find a compromise. At the beginning of the former, Spinoza writes:

The conceptualization offered in the previous chapter of the right of sovereign powers to all things and the transfer of each person's natural right to them, agrees quite well with practice, and practice can be brought very close to it, yet in many respects it will always remain merely theoretical. No one will ever be able to transfer his power and (consequently) his right to another person in such a way that he ceases to be a human being; and there will never be a sovereign power that can dispose of everything just as it pleases.<sup>41</sup>

Looking at those few lines, Spinoza's political project begins to appear more accommodating and coherent. As West clearly points out, in order to guarantee the space for positive freedom «the law should not seek to interfere with those areas of life where the harm caused [...] would be likely to outweigh the benefits».<sup>42</sup> In reading the pages of the *Treatise*, in fact, is always necessary to keep in mind that the social contract is not abstractly conceived or coercively imposed, but is the result of a utilitarian logic, and so are all the decision that the sovereign power should take. Ignoring the

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<sup>39</sup> HOBBS, *Leviathan*, Chapter XXI.

<sup>40</sup> SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 200.

<sup>41</sup> *Ivi*, p. 208.

<sup>42</sup> WEST, *Spinoza on Positive Freedom*, p. 290.

impossibility of controlling completely one's freedom of reasoning, a state which decides to deny this freedom to his subjects would both endanger its own interest and contravene the principles for which it has been established; for «the greater effort to deprive them [people] of freedom to speech, the more obstinately they resist»; they «would be continually thinking one thing and saying something else» and this «would undermine the trust which is the first essential of a state; detestable flattery and deceit would flourish, giving rise to intrigues and destroying every kind of honest behaviour»<sup>43</sup>.

What's then, under the control of the commonwealth? All that can be dangerous for peace and piety to be left without any control, that is an unrestricted liberty of action. For how compelled they may be – perhaps Berlin would concede that – the subjects' behaviour cannot be entrusted to their only will: every action capable of threatening another's rights or the rights of the state must be prohibited (and, if performed, punished). On the other hand, leaving the right to believe and express one's opinion cannot be other than advantageous<sup>44</sup>, for both individual self-fulfilment and intellectual life for of the community. No maturation of reason can be possible out of the social context, «in fact the exercise of understanding is something the individual is unable to achieve alone».<sup>45</sup> Having at hand this fundamental issue, but keeping in mind the *Ethics'* ontological account of the individual, West can finally claim that the individual 'absorption' into a collective entity which Berlin pointed at is – in Spinoza's case – inconsistent. Therefore, he concludes:

Society is necessary for the full development of individuality. It is not simply a necessary evil, a constraint which inevitably limits the negative freedom of individuals. [...] Society is a necessary catalyst but never a substitute for the practice of freedom.<sup>46</sup>

## Conclusions

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<sup>43</sup> SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 255.

<sup>44</sup> Making an exception for those expressions which represent an 'immediately' peril for the peace of the commonwealth or the validity of the social contract. Regrettably, Spinoza does not propose a clear criterion to identify them. For a closer examination Cf. *Theological-Political Treatise* (Chapter XX) and NADLER, *A Book Forged in Hell* (Chapter 9).

<sup>45</sup> WEST, *Spinoza on Positive Freedom*, p. 295.

<sup>46</sup> *Ivi*, p. 296.

For how ambiguous Spinoza's political project may be, is somewhat implausible to accuse him of justifying a despotic paternalism without considering, in his very words, its total condemnation.

Were it as easy to control people's minds as to restrain their tongues, every sovereign would rule securely and there would be no oppressive governments? For all men would live according to the minds of those who govern them and would judge what is true or false, or good or bad, in accordance with their decree alone. But as we noted at the beginning of chapter 17, it is impossible for one person's mind to be absolutely under another's control. For no one can transfer to another person his natural right, or ability, to think freely and make his own judgments about any matter whatsoever, and cannot be compelled to do so. This is why a government which seeks to control people's minds is considered oppressive, and any sovereign power appears to harm its subjects and usurp their rights when it tries to tell them what they must accept as true and reject as false and what beliefs should inspire their devotion to God. For these things are within each person's own right, which he cannot give up even were he to wish to do so.<sup>47</sup>

In his defence of the Dutch philosopher, David West is to be praised for having unearthed – under these last, almost trivial, evidences – a large amount of moral and ontological arguments, thanks to which the position of Spinoza regarding the notion of positive freedom has been enriched and sheltered from some (partly) unjustified charges.

Still, Isaiah Berlin's general concern for this particular meaning of liberty remains concrete and full of interest. As to whether his critique to Spinoza hits in the mark, the evaluation cannot be so gentle. Beyond any doubt, few passages of the *Theological-Political Treatise* offer the flank to an authoritarian interpretation, but their strong affirmation might get to contradict both the principles and the purposes of the work itself.

However, something in behalf of Berlin can be said. In the first place is not so unconceivable, to our contemporary eyes, that an acceptable political freedom may require something more than the sole *libertas philosophandi* which Spinoza battled for. Secondly, is to be recognized that a kind of paternalism stands, even if in a more innocent form, in Spinoza's mind. Surely it does not portion neither the coercive strength nor the authoritative purposes with the monstrous, despotic paternalism which Berlin's worried about; but it still conveys the rationalist assumption that in facing with a problem «there can only be one true answer, supplied by the methods of rational

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<sup>47</sup> SPINOZA, *Theological-Political Treatise*, p. 250.

reflection, all the other answers being false».<sup>48</sup> For how obsolete it would seem, Spinoza is convinced that, in spite of all, the only way to achieve ‘true’ freedom and happiness is reason, and that the State should do all what is in its power to allow its subjects to be rational. In attempting to (re)define such idea, we might talk about a sort of ‘instrumental’, instead of ‘substantial’ paternalism. Still, even this position would be unacceptable for Berlin. In fact, the very core of his concept of liberty is inherently irreconcilable with any sort of rational deliberation, since

the intrinsic value of freedom, especially of negative freedom, is in its embodiment of the ‘basic freedom’ of choice itself – not the rational choice among genuine goods and worthwhile options that is designated by autonomy, but choice *simpliciter*.<sup>49</sup>

No matter how such choice may be: «capricious or whimsical; perverse or unreasonable, quixotic or self-destructive: it remains choice, and, as such, the source of the value of negative freedom (as well as of positive freedom in its genuine conceptions)».<sup>50</sup> The Spinozian notion of liberty – i.e. self-determination through reason – is, to Berlin’s eyes, «an unacceptably and unnecessarily restrictive requirement»<sup>51</sup> for guaranteeing a pluralist society. Moreover, a similar notion of freedom could be in some sense illiberal or, in a way which is apparently in contrast to Spinoza’s own will, harmful for someone’s *conatus*. Referring to Berlin’s *From Hope and Fear Set Free*,<sup>52</sup> John Gray clarifies the issue in these terms:

The pursuit of the ideal of autonomy, if that invokes the increase of self-knowledge, may issue in a weakening or destruction of personal powers that depend for their vitality or existence on repression, on blockages of self-knowledge. This is Berlin’s argument in his important and neglected paper, ‘From Hope and Fear Set Free’, in which he conjectures that great artistic gifts – the gifts of Van Gogh or Dostoyevsky, say – may be dependent on flaws of self-knowledge and may be destroyed, or impaired, by an enhancement of self-knowledge. [...] It is not only that the ideal of autonomy crowds out other ideals of life, then, but that it may be self-limiting on the individual case as well. The pursuit of autonomy through enhanced self-knowledge may deplete in a person powers and capacities that are centrally constitutive of the self his choices have created, that are necessary for the pursuit of projects by which that self is defined, and which are

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<sup>48</sup> Isaiah BERLIN, *A Reply to David West*, «Political Studies», XLI, 1993, p. 297.

<sup>49</sup> John GRAY, *Berlin*, Fontana Press, London 1995, p. 29.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>51</sup> *Ivi*, p. 33 (emphasis mine).

<sup>52</sup> Isaiah BERLIN, *From Hope and Fear Set Free*, in *Concept and Categories*, Hogarth Press, London 1978, pp. 173-198.

recognized by others as essential for the accomplishment of intrinsically valuable activities.<sup>53</sup>

From this point on, some personal considerations should be drawn.

In the first place, the ‘power-repressive’ danger of rational self-determination does not seem to be effective in criticizing the Spinozian notion of political freedom. The argument aroused in *From Hope and Fear Set Free* presupposes the existence of one and only reason-dictated path to self-empowerment and happiness; but Spinoza’s affiliation to such assumption seems to be – on the political terrain – unsustainable, as we have already showed in the previous paragraphs (namely, 2.2. Rejecting the ‘Social Self’). Maybe, the application of Berlins’ argument on the field of *Ethics* would be more adherent, and possibly theoretically interesting, but there is no time nor space to discuss such question here.

Secondly, if Spinoza’s notion of freedom could be intended as somehow restrictive or unjust for the citizen, the reason-free ‘basic freedom’ of Berlin may be intended as potentially dangerous for a democratic State. Since the choice it embodies «could be capricious or whimsical, perverse or unreasonable, quixotic or self-destructive»<sup>54</sup>, it is not implausible to imagine it even as narcissistic, evil, socially harmful or indifferent to public good as well. If such a hypothesis was plausible, the very fathers of modern liberalism which Berlin himself has been guided by would immediately arise, intending to remind us that even the most complete freedom cannot prevent from tyranny. Despite their defence of individual freedom, neither Benjamin Constant, nor John Stuart Mill nor Alexis de Tocqueville were unaware of the greatest danger related to the modern – i.e. negative – notion of liberty: the possibility to subordinate the right to self-governance and participation to public power to the pursuit of private independence and particular interests.<sup>55</sup> A not-so-far danger we must keep an eye on, *a fortiori* today.

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<sup>53</sup> GRAY, *Berlin*, p. 34.

<sup>54</sup> *Ivi*, p. 29.

<sup>55</sup> COHEN, *Berlin and the liberal tradition*, p. 220. See also CONSTANT, *The Liberty of the Ancients Compared with that of the Moderns*, pp. 326-328; John Stuart MILL, *Considerations on Representative Government*, in John M. ROBSON (ed.), in *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill: Essays on Politics and Society Part 2*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 1977, pp. 413-421; Alexis de TOCQUEVILLE,

Thirdly, and lastly, a brief apology of the private and public recourse to reason. Granted that reason is no less a ‘protean’ concept as that of liberty, that individual and citizens are usually far from behaving and judging rationally in approaching to private and public question, and even that – as Berlin would point out<sup>56</sup> – human choices deal with incommensurable goods and evils; still, a wherever possible precise and ‘objective’ evaluation of one’s own and other’s points of view is probably the best tool at our disposal to deliberate on ideas and policies in both freedom and security, since the borders between a boundless freedom and a risky arbitrariness are not definite, nor easy to find.

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<sup>56</sup> GRAY, *Berlin*, p. 23.

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