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The clash between monism and pluralism does exist. It has allowed the emergence of pivotal political theories during the centuries. It has inspired the construction of political models and theories. In our work we analyzed the term and the concept of monism and pluralism as having an historical dimension, changing over centuries, differently interpreted by the authors and ideologies that we have taken into account. In this sense, we investigated the terms and the concepts of monism and pluralism from the perspective of the history of political thought. That is the reason why we chose to talk about *monisms* and *pluralisms*. Through this particular viewpoint we analyzed how over centuries *monisms* and *pluralisms* have been used as conceptual frameworks, theories, ideologies to reflect on long-term issues such as the nature of political power, the problem of political legitimacy, the relationship between the rulers and the ruled, the meaning of freedom and tolerance, the sense of living together within contexts characterized by diversity. In other terms, we chose to reflect on monism and pluralism not as theoretical entities but as *monisms and pluralisms inside history*. In doing so, we tried to show how monisms and pluralisms in the history of political thought have posed and continue to pose a series of issues and problems concerning all of us and far from being mere erudition.

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Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political Thought



edited by
Andrea Catanzaro
Sara Lagi



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 of Political Thought

POLITICAL SCIENCES

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Sara Lagi wrote the essay *Sir Isaiah Berlin: against Monism (1953-1958)* and the Afterword entitled *Monisms and Pluralisms in the History of Political Thought: some (not conclusive) remarks*. She also edited the essays of Andrea Catanzaro, Iolanda Richichi, Nicoletta Stradaoli, Federica Falchi, Stefano Parodi and Pejman Abdolmohammadi.

Andrea Catanzaro wrote the essay *The Achaeans of Homer and those of Hobbes: from a pluralistic monism to absolutism* and the Preface entitled *Why monisms and pluralisms? Reasons and purposes of a path*. He also edited the essays of Sara Lagi, Carlo Morganti, Carlotta Stegagno, Davide Suin, Giuseppe Sciara and the Bibliography.

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Chapter Eleven

SIR ISAIAH BERLIN: AGAINST MONISM (1953-1958)

Sara Lagi

*“All forms of tampering with human beings, getting at them,
shaping them against their will
to your own pattern, all thought control and conditioning is,
therefore, a denial of that in men which makes them men...”*

I. Berlin, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958)

11.1 INTRODUCING THE PERSON AND HIS WORK

In the past century Sir Isaiah Berlin (1909-1997) embodied one of the most prominent intellectuals of liberal inspiration we had in Europe. By defining Sir Isaiah Berlin as a liberal thinker I am referring to the definition of political liberalism proposed by D. J. Manning in his major *Liberalism*, according to which liberalism implies a view of power as limited in order to protect individual freedom, minorities and “society’s dynamism”, along with a rooted fear towards any form of social conformism¹. Having said that, I have no intention to reduce or simplify the complexity and originality of Berlin’s liberal thought, but rather to briefly clarify the points of connection between Berlin,

¹ D. J. MANNING, *Liberalism*, London, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd 1976 p. 15.

on the one hand, and the philosophical and political tradition we call liberalism on the other. It was Isaiah Berlin to coin the term monism and pluralism in the 1950s and his life long he elaborated these two concepts giving them a precise philosophical and political connotation. In general terms, by monism and pluralism Berlin meant a particular philosophical approach to the meaning of life and reality resulting – according to the English intellectual – in two different philosophical views. Pluralism implies recognizing the complexity of reality, pluralism of values and pluralism of ideas whereas monism refers to those philosophies and thinkers trying to reduce such complexity to a single model, theory, standard².

In this essay I want to focus on Berlin's idea and critique of *monism* because, in my opinion, it encompasses some of the key components of his political thought. What I propose in my essay is not so much to examine Berlin's interpretation of those cultural heritages (notably Enlightenment and Romanticism) that, in his opinion, influenced both monism and pluralism – for which there is extensive and excellent academic literature about³ – as much as to trace and reconstruct some key aspects of Berlin's discourse on monism *per se*, i.e. I want to show, through a series of writings dating back to the 1950s, how his critique of monism reflects a particular vision of moral and human reality and how, in connection with this, it reflects his liberal spirit in moral, philosophical and political terms.

² I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty* (1958), pp. 1-32, in Id., *Four Essays on Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1969, now available online at: www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de. Berlin's famous seminal essay is also included in H. HARDY (edited by), *I. Berlin, Liberty*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002. For a summary on Berlin's life, his scholarly work and his definition of monism and pluralism see: the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy online: <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/berlin>.

³ See: B. BAUM - R. NICHOLS (edited by), *Isaiah Berlin and the Politics of Freedom: "Two Concepts of Freedom" 50 Years Later*, New York and London, Routledge, 2013 G. CROWDER, *Isaiah Berlin. Liberty and Pluralism*, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2004; G. CROWDER - H. HARDY (edited by), *The One and the Many: Reading Isaiah Berlin*, Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books, 2006; J. L. CHERNISS, *Introduction to I. Berlin, Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, edited by H. Hardy, London, Pimlico, 2007; J. L. CHERNISS, *A Mind and its Time: the Development of Berlin's Political Thought*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013; J. GRAY, *Isaiah Berlin: An Interpretation of his Thought*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, reprinted version 2013; R. HAUSHEER, *Introduction to I. Berlin, Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, edited by H. HARDY, London, Hogarth Press, 1979; J. REED, *The Continuing Challenge of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, in "European Journal of Political Theory", vol. 8, n. 2, 2009, pp. 253-262; H. YEH, *History, Method and Pluralism: a Reinterpretation of Isaiah Berlin's Political Thought*, Phd. Thesis, London School of Economics and Political Science, UK, 2006, available online at: etheses.lse.ac.uk. For a complete and updated international bibliography about scholarly works on Berlin see: The Isaiah Virtual Library, available online at: berlin.wolf.ox.ac.uk.

I can commence by saying that Berlin elaborated the fundamental dichotomy monism-pluralism through a series of scholarly works dedicated to the history of ideas and intellectual history. He was firmly convinced of the power of ideas, of their impact in historical, social, political terms. It is Berlin who reminds us of the German Poet Heinrich Heine's warning that the power of ideas can be immense: "philosophical concept nurtured in the stillness of a professor's study could destroy a civilization"⁴. Berlin argued that ideas and their influence should never be undervalued and this is one of the chief elements characterizing all his intellectual works, including his reflection on monism and pluralism. The English philosopher's profound interest in the history of ideas developed over years and in order to fully understand it we must look back at his life and cultural formation. Isaiah Berlin was born in 1909 to a wealthy Jewish family in the city of Riga and when he was a child he moved with his parents to England where he grew up and received an excellent education. He attended Oxford University where he studied philosophy and initially had contacts with A. J. Ayer and the group of logical positivists – a sort of English version of Viennese logical positivism – whose major objective was to conceptually separate philosophy from any form of metaphysics with the declared purpose to coherently change philosophical method into a true scientific method. Berlin was impressed and fascinated by logical positivism, chiefly as far as the critique of the traditional philosophical thought embodied by Hegel, Fichte, Schelling was concerned⁵.

In 1939 Berlin published his first major work, an articulated scholarly analysis on *Karl Marx: his life and Environment* (1939), where one can already identify two of the key elements of his further intellectual reflection, namely the necessity for scholars to recognize the importance of historical dimension in the shaping of political ideas and the profound conviction that philosophical, ethical, moral questions could not be studied and explained by means of scientific method. Both aspects emerging from the essay on Marx can be considered as Berlin's personal response to logical positivism and his first serious path towards a specific direction of study focused on "the love of literature and ideas"⁶.

During the 1950s Berlin published some of his most relevant works, from his *Russia and 1848* to a *Marvellous Decade*, from *Historical Inevitability* to the most popular *Two Concepts of Liberty*. The topics and figures Berlin discussed

⁴ I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty* online version cit., p. 1.

⁵ G. CROWDER, *Isaiah Berlin. Liberty and Pluralism* cit., pp. 1 ss.

⁶ C. J. GALIPEAU, *Isaiah Berlin's Liberalism*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1994, pp. 4-5- 21-22.

in all these writings were highly diversified: from Marx to Rousseau, from scientific determinism to Romanticism, from the heritage of Enlightenment to his beloved Alexander Herzen's populist socialism.

Yet, within this diversity of interests and issues, Berlin's ultimate intellectual and political vision is quite clear: he tried to critically reflect on long-term philosophical, ethical, political questions, such as the nature of liberty, human dignity, human will and personality, how to protect individuals and individual freedom from power abuses⁷. Investigating and critically thinking about these questions – profoundly interconnected with the dichotomy between monism and pluralism – corresponded not only to Berlin's ultimate and most intimate philosophical interests, to his aforementioned liberal inspiration, but also, in my opinion, to his intellectual and political need to reflect on the idea and meaning of liberty within a complex historical, political and cultural context, still influenced by the tragedy of WWII and totalitarianism. Discussing about liberty during the 1950s was much more than a mere academic exercise: it was a way to seek an explanation to the moral and political devastation of the previous decade.

11.2 BERLIN AND THE IMPORTANCE OF THINKING LIKE A "FOX"...

In the early 1950s Berlin was already an internationally recognized scholar and in many respects he could be defined as a representative of the so called "free" world. It is true that Berlin was passionately against soviet communism but his reflection on monism and pluralism goes beyond his personal political sympathies and affiliation⁸. Already in his scholarly work on Marx, dating back to 1939, one can observe Berlin's opposition to all those philosophies and theories – including, in his opinion, Marx' scientific materialism – trying to identify and disclose objective laws capable of determining and therefore explaining an historical, social, political dimension⁹. A kind of intellectual opposition Berlin would further elaborate some years later, and more precisely in his work *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, published in 1953.

⁷ See: G. CROWDER, *Isaiah Berlin. Liberty and Pluralism* cit.

⁸ M. IGNATIEFF, *Isaiah Berlin: A Life*, London, Vintage, 2000, p. 193 ss.

⁹ G. CROWDER, *Isaiah Berlin. Liberty and Pluralism* cit., pp. 20-23.

The Hedgehog and the Fox was above all an elegant exercise of history of ideas, where one can already identify the core elements of the dichotomy monism-pluralism. The title referred to a fragment attributed to the ancient poet Archilocus, according to whom “a fox knows many things but a hedgehog one important thing”. It was an essay basically dedicated to the human and intellectual figure of Lev Tolstoy, and above all an in-depth analysis of what Berlin thought was the most intimate spiritual and mental conflict characterizing Tolstoy, namely the Russian writer’s being torn between his effort to see the world through an all-embracing view and his writings where reality and people were portrayed in their infinite variety and plurality. In Tolstoy Berlin saw a “hedgehog” and a “fox”. To Berlin, a “hedgehog” was that kind of person who sought an universally valid truth, capable of explaining reality and all of its aspects, aiming at finding out the ultimate sense of everything. Instead, a “fox” was that kind of figure who refused to reduce the awesome variety of reality to one single and univocal explanatory model¹⁰.

Starting from this premise, Berlin was able to portray the figure of Tolstoy in his complexity and nuances. To the author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* the British philosopher recognized the fundamental, undeniable ability to reconstruct and brilliantly describe his time, his society and single personalities with a great sense of psychological and human penetration, grasping their singularity and “multiplicity”, but, at the same time, Berlin stressed how profoundly the Russian artist believed in the existence of a “law” determining the “whole”¹¹:

Tolstoy’s central thesis [...] is that there is a natural law whereby the lives of human beings no less than that of nature are determined; but those men, unable to face this inexorable process, seek to represent it as a succession of free choices, to fix responsibilities for what occurs upon persons endowed by them with heroic virtues or heroic vices, and called them “great men”¹².

¹⁰ I. BERLIN, *The Hedgehog and the Fox. An Essay on Lev Tolstoy’s View of History*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1953, now available online at: <http://uniteyouthdublin.files.wordpress.com> p. 437. From now on, I will refer to the online version. Berlin writes: “For there exists a great chasm between those, on one side, who relate everything to a single central vision, one system, less or more coherent or articulate, in terms of which they understand, think and feel [...] and, on the other side, those who pursue many ends [...] their thought is scattered or diffused, moving on many levels, seizing upon the essence of a vast variety of experiences and objects for what they are in themselves, without [...] seeking to fit them all into [...] a unitary inner vision”. Ivi, pp. 436-437.

¹¹ Ivi, p. 466.

¹² Ibid.

And Tolstoy believed in this because, as Berlin argued:

He advocated a single embracing vision; he preached not variety but simplicity, not many levels of consciousness but reduction to some single level [...] Tolstoy's genius lies in a capacity for marvellously accurate reproduction of the irreproducible [...] But then, this same writer pleads for, indeed preaches with a great fury, particularly in his last, religious phase, the exact opposite: the necessity of expelling everything that does not submit to some very general, very simple standard¹³.

By reading Berlin's essay one can immediately realize two relevant things: first of all the fact that Berlin introduces, interprets and uses the metaphor of the "hedgehog" and the "fox" to identify the chasm between those professing a monistic vision and those embracing the pluralist one. Also, one can see how Berlin's personal sympathies are all for those who think like a "fox" and, in this specific case, for the "fox" inside Tolstoy who is interestingly portrayed like "a fox who drove himself mad by trying to be a hedgehog"¹⁴.

A few years later, in a *Marvellous Decade* (1955), in my opinion, Berlin continued to reflect on monism and pluralism, by approaching the group of intellectuals and writers who emerged in Russia in the mid nineteenth century. Among them Berlin paid particular attention to the personage of Alexander Herzen. Berlin describes Herzen as the father of Russian populist socialism but most importantly he gives us a precious insight into Herzen's human and intellectual personality. The Russian revolutionary is depicted in his complexity: he advocated a profound transformation in Imperial Russia; he defended the importance of individual liberty, he was coherently averse to the tsarist regime but, at the same time – despite his revolutionary claims – he was also scared, according to Berlin, of the potentially tragic consequences on single human lives a revolutionary, violent, radical overthrow of the Russian authoritarian system could have had. Berlin seems to be intellectually and emotionally attracted by Herzen's sincere concern about the tragic effects of any attempt at radically changing a society in the name of an ideal. In these pages, Berlin recognizes to Herzen a "sense of reality" that is – in Berlin's opinion – a key component of a pluralist view of reality and human life¹⁵.

¹³ Ivi, pp. 466-467.

¹⁴ A. RYAN, *The Making of Modern Liberalism*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2012, p. 406. See: pp. 405-406.

¹⁵ I. BERLIN, *A Marvellous Decade*, "Northcliff Lecture" delivered in 1954, re-issued with the title of *A Remarkable Decade*, in Id., *Russian Thinkers*, ed. by H. Hardy and A. Kelly, New York, Viking Press, 1978, pp. 189-197. See also about: C. CROWDER, *Isaiah Berlin. Liberty and Pluralism* cit., p. 32.

Both *The Hedgehog and the Fox* and a *Marvellous Decade* allow us to understand a chief element of Berlin's thought, namely his genuine interest in those intellectual figures, writers, thinkers and ideas capable of grasping and describing the complexity and variety of life, the variety of values, ends, goals, perspectives¹⁶.

Nonetheless, this interest should be put within a broader context of reflection that directly regards the relationship between the way one considers reality, human existence, on the one hand, and the capital and moral issue of human liberty and dignity, on the other. In my opinion, this particular aspect powerfully emerges from Berlin's essay on *Historical Inevitability* (1954), I want to particularly focus on because of the critique Berlin moved against determinism. By this term, Berlin meant all those philosophies seeking to interpret every single aspect of human life as part of a broader design, of a broader "whole", whose subject - as Berlin argued – could vary: it could be the Church, the Party, the Race etc¹⁷:

To find the the explanation of why given individual, or groups of them, act or think or feel in one way rather than another; one must first seek to understand the structure, the state of development and the direction of such "wholes", as for example, the social, political, religious institutions to which such individuals belong; one that is known the behaviour of the individuals [...] should become most logically deducible¹⁸.

In Berlin's view, along with this kind of determinism a second one does exist and, in his opinion, it is much more refined and intellectually elegant. It corresponds to those philosophies, theories, ideologies identifying universally valid, objective, scientific "laws" supposed to regulate and determine human reality and history. This kind of determinism, whose cultural roots Berlin traces back to modern scientism and Enlightenment rationalism, would be based on the assumption that society, politics, human life follow universally valid and comprehensible "laws" that can be identified in the same way a scientist identifies the laws of nature:

¹⁶ Another important Berlin's work characterized by this kind of reflection is Id., *John Stuart Mill and the Ends of Life*, "Robert Waley Cohen Memorial Lecture" delivered in 1959 at the Council of Christians and Jews (London), re-issued in Id., *Four Essays on Liberty* cit.

¹⁷ I. BERLIN, *Historical Inevitability*, "Auguste Comte Memorial Trust", Lecture n. 1 delivered on 12 May 1953 at the London School of Economics and Political Sciences, London, New York, Toronto, Oxford University Press, 1954, p. 5 ss.

¹⁸ Ivi, p. 25.

If Newton was able in principle to explain every moment of every particular constituent of physical nature in terms of a small number of laws of great generality, is it not reasonable to suppose that psychological events [...] could be explained by the use of similar methods? [...] If this is (as surely it is) the theoretical ideal of such sciences as psychology, sociology, anthropology, historical explanations will, if they are successful, simply consist in the application of the laws of the sciences to specific individual situations. [...] The inevitability of historical processes, of trends, of “rises” and “falls”, is merely de facto for those who believe that the universe obeys only “natural laws” which make it what it is¹⁹.

The interesting aspect for me is not so much to evaluate the objectivity (or lack thereof) in Berlin’s interpretation of determinism as much as to follow him step by step in his reflection. Both types of determinism shared, according to Berlin, one basic element, namely a particular idea of individual’s freedom:

All one common characteristic of such outlooks is the implication that individual’s freedom of choice is ultimately an illusion, that the notion that human beings could have chosen otherwise than they did usually rests upon ignorance of facts²⁰.

Berlin’s discourse on determinism represents, in my opinion, an aspect of great relevance for two reasons: on the one hand, his definition and critique of determinism reflects once again – even more powerfully than in his previous works – Berlin’s intellectual hostility towards omni-explanatory theories, ideologies, philosophies, and on the other the ultimate root of such hostility, i.e. the drastic limitation of individual’s freedom that, according to Berlin, inevitably results from those theories assuming to be able to explain the extreme complexity of human life by identifying special “forces”, “wholes” or special “laws” (to obey). Being monist seemed to imply for Berlin the acceptance of determinism, being pluralist implied a critical attitude towards it.

If it is clear that Berlin preferred *foxes* to *hedgehogs* and this preference passed through a clear critique of determinism(s), one key question arises: in what sense, and to what extent Berlin’s reflections just discussed are essential to understand Berlin’s liberal view and his idea of liberty?

¹⁹ Ivi, p. 19.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 20.

11.3 TWO CONCEPTS OF LIBERTY: AGAINST MONISM

A response to this question emerges from Berlin's most popular writing, his *Two concepts of liberty* (1958)²¹, in which he identified a *positive* and a *negative* liberty. We will see how Berlin's interpretation and definition of positive and negative liberty recalls – in part – his previous works. My purpose is to focus on the first type of liberty identified by the English philosopher, because it allows us to better comprehend the significance of monism.

Negative liberty was, according to the British philosopher, involved in the answer to the following question: “what is the area within which the subject – a person or a 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?”, whereas the second form of liberty was involved in the answer to the question of “what, or who, is the source of control or interference that can determine someone to do, or be, this rather than that?”²².

The definition of negative liberty was clearly influenced by the intellectual lesson of Mill, Constant, Tocqueville whom Berlin openly referred to. Negative liberty essentially meant “being free from interference”.²³ Positive liberty coincided with individual's ability to be master of his/her own. Negative and positive liberty apparently seemed to encompass a very similar idea of being free. Instead – as Berlin stresses – they were profoundly different, because, in his opinion, they answered two radically different philosophical (and moral) questions:

The answer to the question “who governs me” is logically distinct from the question “How far does government interfere with me? It is in this difference that the great contrast between the two concepts of negative and positive liberty, in the end, consists. For the “positive” sense of liberty comes to light if we try to answer the question, not “What am I free to do or be?”, but “by whom am I ruled?”. [...] The desire to be governed by myself, or at any rate to participate in the process by which my life is to

²¹ The title refers to the inaugural lecture Berlin delivered at the University of Oxford on 31 October 1958, after accepting one year earlier the prestigious Chair of Social and Political Theory in the same University. The lecture appears in *Four Essays on Liberty* – the collection of a series Berlin's writings – in 1969. Recently, *Two Concepts of Liberty* was re-issued in Id., *Liberty* cit. As stated at the beginning of this essay, I will refer to the online version of Berlin's writing, available at available at: www.wiso.uni-hamburg.de.

²² Ivi, p. 2.

²³ Ibid.

*be controlled, may be as deep a wish as that for a free area of action, and perhaps historically older. But it is not the desire for the same thing*²⁴.

I want to focus my attention on the positive significance of liberty and more precisely on the capital implications (philosophical and political) the question “by whom am I ruled?” had in Berlin’s opinion.

If being free in the positive sense of the word means to govern myself, how – Berlin wonders – can an individual carry out a perfect positive liberty, neutralizing the impact of external factors (from laws of nature to activities of other men)? In his essay Berlin identifies two responses: on the one hand, the first option could be “the retreat in the inner citadel”, that means the refusal of external world, by training oneself to avoid any form of desire, expectation, ambition²⁵. On the other hand, the second option – philosophically more relevant to Berlin – implied the perfect identification between “being free” and “being autonomous”:

*[According to the positive sense of liberty] I identify myself with the controller and escape the slavery of the controlled. I am free because, and in so far as, I am autonomous I obey laws I have imposed them on, or found them in, my uncoerced self*²⁶.

In Berlin’s opinion, both Kant and Rousseau seemed to embrace this particular kind of liberty. More precisely, Kant – Berlin writes – tended to identify an individual’s freedom, namely an individual’s autonomy, with an individual’s ability to govern oneself by reason²⁷. In this sense, in Berlin’s interpretation of Kant, the “Rational Myself” - that basically meant “True Myself” - had to prevail over the “Irrational one” – that basically meant “False Myself”, and by doing so the “Rational Myself” had to coerce the “Irrational Myself” because, from this perspective, “the only true method of attaining freedom [...] is by the use of critical reason, the understanding of what is necessary and what is contingent”²⁸.

Berlin observed that the contrast between “Rational/True Myself” and “Irrational/False Myself” seeped into Romanticism that, according to him, ended up identifying the “Rational/True Myself” with the “Will” capable

²⁴ Ivi, pp. 7-8.

²⁵ Ivi, p. 10.

²⁶ Ivi, p. 15.

²⁷ Ivi, pp. 16-17.

²⁸ Ivi, p. 18.

of creating, changing every aspect of life, as long as G. W. Fichte – as a representative of German Romanticism – went as far to identify this “Will” with the “Will of the Nation” capable of submitting single, individual wills in the name of a superior ideal²⁹.

Once delineated Berlin’s idea of positive liberty, what is really interesting to me is to follow the conceptual trajectory the English philosopher was tracing in his essay of 1958: *what happens – Berlin wonders – whether the philosophical idea of positive liberty is applied to political reality? What kind of consequences could it generate?* If we replace the “Rational/True MySelf” with a Charismatic Leader, a Vision supposed to be the Absolute Truth, with the Leading Party, with a Church, or more simply with a Commonwealth the immediate consequence – as Berlin argues – is the inevitable imposition of this supposed Rational and therefore Just, True, Perfect Subject to the whole community, to the single individuals, who – by obeying this Subject – will become perfectly free because by doing so they will behave according to principles of Rationality³⁰.

*Liberty, so far from being incompatible with authority, becomes virtually identical with it. This is the thought and language of all declarations of the rights of men in the eighteenth century, and of all those who look upon society as design constructed according to rational laws of the wise lawgiver, or of nature, or of history, or of the Supreme Being*³¹.

Berlin thought that we can directly or indirectly find this kind of assumption in many prominent thinkers of European political tradition: Spinoza, Rousseau, Kant and in some respects even Locke and Montesquieu. In all of them Berlin identified one basic idea, that freedom does not mean “to do what is stupid or irrational”, but rather to behave according to rational principles and, in his opinion, all these thinkers basically tended to associate these rational principles with laws³².

Berlin emphasized the dangers implied in the identification of autonomy with authority, liberty with law. Following this reasoning, what happens then – Berlin wonders – if someone rebels against the law and authority, what happens if someone, led by irrationality, passions, instinct, refuses this kind of liberty?

²⁹ Ivi, p. 20 ss.

³⁰ Ivi, p. 18 ss.

³¹ Ivi, p. 18.

³² Ivi, pp. 17-18.

In an ideal society, Berlin argues, these individuals should be coerced, that means, they should be “forced” to be free because the only way they have to be free is to obey the law. Berlin correctly insists on one important point: the idea that being free basically means to obey the laws of reason and the identification between the laws of reason and a specific political system inevitably encompass a powerful threat to individual freedom and rights because in the name of Reason (or any other ideal supposed as universally valid and rational) a political regime, a single Leader, a Party can justify any form of coercion. It is no coincidence that Berlin quotes Fichte who said: “no one has...rights against reason”³³.

It is quite clear that Berlin’s definition of positive liberty and the dangers it might imply was a critique of every form of political ideology or regime that, in the name of a superior ideal, or in the name – like in this case – of the “true” idea of freedom commit abuses of power. But I think that Berlin’s reflection on the meaning of positive liberty – along with his attack against determinism(s) – is also an integrative part of his discourse on monism and pluralism. Berlin did not want to say that the only “good” or “just” form of liberty was negative liberty in contraposition to the positive, or worse that obeying laws was something unjust. He rather wanted to stress that the positive concept of liberty had a strong monistic connotation: behind the idea of positive liberty he believed to recognize that *forma mentis*, typical of monism – and I would add typical of determinism – according to which there must be one single principle, one single theory, one single element capable of explaining everything, capable of giving a reason to everything, capable of showing us the intrinsic harmony of reality. A kind of *forma mentis* characterizing, as I have tried to show earlier, the different forms of determinism as well as all those intellectuals, thinkers who could be defined as “*hedgehogs*”.

The positive idea of liberty seems to have a monistic connotation and this is why, according to Berlin, it could potentially nurture and justify the establishing of despotic regimes. Yet, one fundamental question remains to be clarified about Berlin’s idea of monism (in contraposition to pluralism), i.e. trying to understand the profound philosophical and moral root of monism. It is Berlin who clearly explains this important aspect in his essay: in his opinion, monism and more precisely all those monistic political systems professing the existence of one single universally valid and just Belief, ready to sacrifice “individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals”, are fundamentally based on the idea that “all the positive values in

³³ Ivi, pp. 19-20.

which men have believed must, in the end, be compatible, and perhaps even entail one another”³⁴.

In these pages, Berlin declares once again and even with more force to be against those philosophies, ideologies and political systems believing and seeking to reach a supposed “final harmony in which all riddles are solved, all contradictions are reconciled”³⁵. Against those armed with unshakable faith in a “total harmony of true values”, Berlin advocates the power of “empirical observation and ordinary human knowledge”³⁶.

In doing so, Berlin seems to embrace and maintain the British philosophical tradition, skeptical and reluctant towards excessively abstract and omni-explanatory theories:

*The world that we encounter in ordinary experience is one in which we are faced with choices between ends equally ultimate, and claims equally absolute, the realisation of some of which must inevitably involve the sacrifice of others. Indeed, it is because this their situation that men place such immense value upon the freedom to choose; for if they had assurance that in some perfect state, realisable by men on earth, no end pursued by them would ever be in conflict, the necessity and agony of choice would disappear, and with it the central importance of the freedom to choose*³⁷.

In my opinion, in this passage we can fully grasp the ultimate bond between Berlin’s critique of monism and his liberal attitude. He is critical towards monism and he is a thinker of liberal inspiration because he fundamentally sees in monistic theories, philosophies, ideologies the refusal of that immense pluralism of ends and values representing – in his opinion – one of the conditions to the “freedom to choose”. This liberal heart of Berlin’s thought emerges even better and more powerfully from the reflections he dedicates to pluralism in contraposition to monism. Berlin declares his philosophical (and moral) preference for pluralism. At the beginning of this essay I wrote that pluralism, according to the English philosopher, is that view recognizing the variety and complexity of reality and the human condition, so diversified and complex they can not be reduced to one single standard. But just because it means all these things, pluralism, in Berlin’s opinion, will tend to accept freedom to choose and it does it because, unlike

³⁴ Ivi, pp. 29-30.

³⁵ Ivi, p. 30.

³⁶ Ivi, p. 29.

³⁷ Ivi, pp. 29-30.

monism, it recognizes more than one single end, more than one single value supposed as universally true:

Pluralism, with the measure of “negative” liberty that it entails seems to me a truer and more humane ideal than the goals of those who seek in the great disciplined, authoritarian structures the ideal of “positive” self-mastery but classes, or peoples, or the whole of mankind. It is truer, because it does, at least, recognize the fact that human goals are many, not all of them commensurable, and in perpetual rivalry with one another. [...] It is more humane because it does not (as the system-builders do) deprive men, in the name of some remote, or incoherent, ideal, of much that they have found to be indispensable to their life as unpredictably self-transforming human beings³⁸.

In this passage Berlin defends pluralism in opposition to monism – as a “more humane ideal” because it recognizes individual’s freedom that, for Berlin, means individual’s dignity. When writing about “system-builders” depriving “men in the name of some remote ideal” – it seems to me – Berlin is referring not only or simply to tyrannical systems but more precisely to the twentieth century totalitarian regimes with their ambition of creating a new Race, a new Mankind, Justice and Equality on earth. Behind Berlin’s discourse on monism and pluralism there is the persistent shadow of totalitarianism and in many respects we could interpret Berlin’s reflection on monism as an attempt at finding the philosophical, ideological and moral roots of the totalitarian tragedy³⁹.

However, even from this perspective one element clearly emerges from our analysis, namely Berlin’s refusal of any “dogmatic certainty”, and his idea that reality is too complex, diversified, characterized by too many different and equally absolute ends to be philosophically explained and politically governed by a monistic credo, faith, ideology. In Berlin, accepting and internalizing this complexity means to defend individual’s ability and right to choose – regardless with the content of the choice – because just this “necessity of choosing” that gives “its value to freedom”⁴⁰.

But, in Berlin’s opinion, this “necessity of choosing” does concretely exist and can be preserved only within a (political) space granting individual freedom, rights, recognizing the ultimate value pluralism, paradoxically including the

³⁸ Ivi, p. 31.

³⁹ C. AARSBERGEN-LIGTVOET, *Isaiah Berlin. A Value Pluralist and Humanist, View of Human Nature and the Meaning of Life*, Amsterdam-New York, Editions Rodopi B.V, 2006, pp. 27 ss.

⁴⁰ I. BERLIN, *Two Concepts of Liberty* cit., p. 31.

risks such pluralism might cause. In other words, Berlin's refusal of monism seems to be indissolubly interconnected with anti-dogmatism that, in my opinion, represents one of the core elements of his being a liberal intellectual. Against any form of monism, against any form of "dogma", Berlin opposed the infinite complexity and variety of reality, the idea of freedom to choose, pluralism of values and goals. If we look at our world, Berlin's lesson seems to be still extraordinarily current and evocative.