

Della Casa, Alessandro, 'Monismo, pluralismo, libertà in Isaiah Berlin', MA thesis, Tuscia University, Viterbo, 2012

The aim of this thesis is to analyse the work of Isaiah Berlin as historian of ideas and as political philosopher, especially on the issues of monism, pluralism and liberty. The method adopted is that of philological interpretation of Berlin's thought and historical reconstruction of the intellectual context in which he formulated and developed it.

The first chapter focuses on the analysis of monism (particularly its Enlightenment version), the second on the emergence of pluralism through three great transvaluations of values: Hellenistic philosophy, Machiavellian thought, and Romanticism, the latter preceded by the break made by such Counter-Enlightenment thinkers as Vico, Hamann and Herder.

The third chapter examines Berlin's interpretation of twentieth-century totalitarianism. The first section treats the evolution of his interpretation of Marx's thought, showing that Berlin's early interpretation underwent a change after he visited Russia in 1945 and 1956. The second section describes his interpretation of right-wing totalitarianism, arguing that Berlin not only affirms a link between Fascism and Mainstream or Romantic irrationalism, but also dwells on the monistic (even rationalistic) roots of Fascism.

Criticisms (in particular those of Zeev Sternhell) of Berlin's work as a historian of ideas are described and challenged in the fourth chapter. Some points of convergence between Berlin and other contemporary philosophers, such as Friedrich von Hayek and Jacob L. Talmon, are recognised. Yet considering Berlin as merely a Cold War liberal is a limited outlook, for it prevents us noticing many important aspects of his philosophy, such as the condemnation of certain technocratic aspects of the Western world.

The fifth chapter is dedicated to the two main features of Berlin's philosophy: the distinction between positive and negative liberty, and the formulation of value pluralism. The second section in particular analyses the principles according to which Berlin distinguishes between relativism and pluralism, the latter primarily based on empirical knowledge and influenced by a Meineckean historicist stress on historical awareness.

The last chapter focuses on the definition of Berlinian liberalism, and on its connection with value pluralism. Though his non-foundational, empirical approach towards human reality makes Berlin's liberalism unsystematic, it allows him to understand and safeguard the different and conflicting human values. Hence, through his ability to understand and uphold otherness, Berlin shows his 'inner consistency'. His rejection as misconceived and dangerous of any attempt to create a perfect society also makes his pluralistic liberalism particularly relevant in today's re-emerging technocratic liberalism.