

Ben-Artzi, Amir, 'Anthropological Dimensions in Isaiah Berlin's Approach to Ideas' (in Hebrew), MA thesis, Tel Aviv University, 2001

This study examines the possible resemblances between Isaiah Berlin's approach to ideas, and a spirit of inquiry which is exhibited by anthropology, especially cultural anthropology. The term 'anthropological' will be used as a code name for a spirit of inquiry which is focused on the empirical and concrete human being, trying to understand her in her own terms, as a part of a larger culture. This holistic spirit deeply recognises the huge diversity of human beings, cultures, ways of life and values over the ages – a recognition that breeds pluralistic and tolerant tendencies.

In this sense, Isaiah Berlin's approach as an historian of ideas and in some ways also as a political philosopher was cultural–anthropological. Since the beginning of his intellectual path, and most prominently after his reading in Vico and in Herder, Berlin's 'sense of reality' exhibited holistic tendencies and deep sensitivities towards the diversity and the concreteness of the human existence. Berlin often approached ideas descriptively, through empirical–anthropological reflections on the concrete ways in which models and concepts functioned in human lives across the ages and in different cultures. The study firstly maps Berlin's connections with the anthropological world and concludes that his spirit is close to cultural anthropology in Clifford Geertz's hermeneutical version and in the tradition of Ruth Benedict.

Berlin resisted any attempt to approach the human and social sciences through a formalistic search for general rules, and offered instead a Vichian–Herderian approach, which is largely anthropological. Berlin was strongly sympathetic to the Vichian attempt to understand any culture by identifying with its own point of view and by grasping the totality of its way of life, including its unique myths, rituals, rites, symbols and idioms. This emphasis on cultural specificity and the fact the Berlin termed both Vico's and Herder's approach 'anthropological', show why Berlin can be called an anthropological historian of ideas.

The study examines the anthropological dimensions in Berlin's liberalism, while presenting John Gray's discussion of Berlin and commenting on it. As a political philosopher, Berlin's anthropological tendencies support his liberalism: his holistic approach drives him to examine political ideas in relation to the total ways of life in which they are embedded; his empirical–anthropological recognition of cultural pluralism is associated with his view of the liberal culture; his defense of liberalism is not only theoretical, but it is rather based on a descriptive–empirical approach towards human beings and societies; his use of Vichian empathetic imagination serves as a drive for tolerance; and finally, Berlin's liberalism sees the recognition of the need to belong to a cultural community as essential for the liberal order.