



The Romantic Revolution in Politics and Morals

This PDF is one of a series designed to assist scholars in their research on Isaiah Berlin, and the subjects in which he was interested.

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The Romantic Revolution in Politics and Morals

Transcript of a lecture recorded in the Graham Memorial Chapel at
Washington University in St Louis on 19 March 1969

The recording may be heard at bit.ly/RomRevPolMor
The lecture proper begins at 06:33 (p. 5 of this transcript)



The Graham Memorial Chapel, Washington University at St Louis

[The chapel organ plays for 43 seconds]

CHAIR [00:44, *opening words missing*] [... Sir Isaiah Berlin] is President of Wolfson College, a new graduate foundation at Oxford, and professor in the humanities at the City University in New York.¹ Sir Isaiah has had an academic and intellectual career of immense distinction. He's been a fellow

¹ Formally, he was Professor of the Humanities in the City University of New York.

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of All Souls College and a lecturer in philosophy at New College. He held his distinguished chair in social and political theory at Oxford from 1957 to 1967. He has been four times visiting professor at Harvard, has been a visiting professor at Bryn Mawr, Chicago and Princeton.



The interior of the Graham Memorial Chapel

The body of his writings represents important contributions to the fields of Russian intellectual history, political theory and the philosophy of history. His books include, among others, *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment*, *Historical Inevitability* and *Two Concepts of Liberty*. Perhaps his best-known work is his brilliant essay on Tolstoy's view of history, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*. That The book, like his other important writings, evidences two characteristics that have come to be hallmarks of Sir Isaiah's work: towering erudition and elegant lucidity in style. His biographer, in a recent edition of *Current Biography*,² gives us brief accounts illustrative respectively of these two characteristics. Perhaps neither of these accounts is apocryphal.

With respect to the first, the biographer speaks of the breadth of Berlin's 'almost legendary erudition', and then remarks, 'Some persons who know him believe that Isaiah Berlin can absorb information by a process of "subconscious osmosis" without ever opening the cover of a book.' The second account attests not only to the elegant lucidity of his style, but may give us a clue to why he thinks – why he tends to place

² **'Berlin, Sir Isaiah'**, *Current Biography*, Yearbook 1964, ed. Charles Moritz (New York, 1965), 38–40 at 38–9.

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credence in doctrines of historical accident over doctrines of historical inevitability. The biographer mentions that during the Second World War, Berlin held the post of First Secretary in the British Embassy in Washington: 'His dispatches were widely admired as models of their kind and attracted the attention of Sir Winston Churchill himself. Accordingly, Mr "I. Berlin" was invited to luncheon at 10 Downing Street.' The conversation between the Prime Minister and his guest turned out to have been among the most baffling conversations ever to have taken place in those historically opaque environs. And this was explained later 'by the discovery that the guest was in fact the noted American songwriter, Irving Berlin, who had received the invitation by mistake'. I am reasonably sure that we have the prophet Berlin and not the psalmist Berlin with us today.

Appearances by economist-diplomat-author John Kenneth Galbraith, civil rights leader Julian Bond, and British scholar Sir Isaiah Berlin will highlight the Spring schedule of the WU Assembly Series.

Sir Isaiah Berlin, a noted thinker in the fields of philosophy, social and political theory, and literature will speak on March 19. The author of numerous books and essays, he has been a member of the faculty at Oxford University since 1932 and president of Wolfson College since 1966. He was knighted in 1957.

Student Life, Washington University, 7 February 1969, 1

You will remember that in *The Hedgehog and the Fox* he makes brilliant use of the tensions between the fox, who knows many things, and the hedgehog, who knows one big thing. I think Sir Isaiah knows many important things, and I believe he is going to let us in on some of them today. The title of his lecture is 'The Romantic Revolution in Politics and Morals'. Sir Isaiah Berlin. *[applause]*

1B [04:57] May I begin by thanking you very much for your very kind words. The first observation about me is, I'm afraid, apocryphal. The second is true. There are about seventeen versions of what happened between Mr Churchill and Mr Irving Berlin, all of which I've heard and all of which appear to be true. *[audience and speaker laugh]*

Lecture by Briton

Sir Isaiah Berlin, British scholar and author, will speak at 11 a.m. Wednesday on "The Romantic Revolution in Politics and Morals" at Washington University's Graham Chapel.

The author was born in Latvia and educated at Oxford. He has been an Oxford faculty member since 1932. His best-known books include "The Hedgehog and the Fox," "The Age of Enlightenment" and "Two Concepts of Liberty." The lecture is open to the public without charge.

St Louis Post-Dispatch, Sunday 16 March 1969, 6H

**Berlin in
Graham Chapel**

British scholar and author Sir Isaiah Berlin will speak on "The Romantic Revolution in Politics and Morals" at 11 a.m. tomorrow in Graham Chapel as part of the Assembly Series. He will also conduct a colloquium at 4:30 p.m. in the Alumni House, sponsored by the WU Department of Philosophy.

Sir Isaiah, born in Latvia and educated at Oxford, has been a faculty member at Oxford since 1932. He was Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory from 1957-67 and now is president of Wolfson College, Oxford, a new graduate foundation. He currently is visiting professor at the City University of New York.

Sir Isaiah, who was knighted in 1957, has written extensively on philosophy, social and political theory and Russian intellectual history. His best-known books include *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, *Historical Inevitability*, *The Age of Enlightenment*, and *Two Concepts of Liberty*.

He has been described as a man of "almost legendary erudition."

Student Life, Washington University, 18 March 1969, 1

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May I say one thing before I begin, which I'm afraid I have to do whenever any audience of any size honours me by its appearance. I tend to talk very fast in a low voice, and it sometimes happens that people, particularly people at the back, cannot understand and indeed cannot hear. If this is the case, I should be glad if people at the back indicated – on the assumption that they wish to hear, that is to say [*laughter*] – indicated the fact that they couldn't hear by some mild eccentricity of behaviour, such as, I don't know, shuffling their feet or raising their hands, or something of the kind, in which case I'll do my best to go more slowly and talk more loudly. I can't promise that this will happen, but I can promise to do my best. I assume that what I'm now saying can be heard at the back [*laughter*], otherwise these remarks are somewhat self-stultifying.

Now, if I may, I'll begin with my subject, which is the Romantic revolution in politics and ethics. [06:22]

LET ME BEGIN by saying that in the history of ideas, if one studies it, one comes across the extraordinary fact that from time to time very large transformations of categories occur. Not so much the discovery of new answers of a powerful kind to ancient questions which have been asked in the past and inadequately answered by previous thinkers, as happened in the great discoveries of the sciences – say Newton, who gave a powerful and dominant answer in his time to questions which had puzzled his predecessors. Not so much that, but a total transformation of the framework within which the questions are asked, so that it isn't so much that questions are answered as that old questions suddenly cease to have meaning. New concepts and categories come in. The causes of this, how it occurred and why it occurred, is a separate question. Ideas don't 'breed' ideas, and therefore there is some degree of social and historical explanation due for this.

At any rate, enormous revolutions in thought which transform the types of questions asked, the types of answers given, so that ancient questions appear not so much unanswered as irrelevant or meaningless. This is what happened when the Judaeo-Christian tradition superseded that of the Greeks, when the whole notion of man was transformed, and the kind of questions which the Greeks asked became unintelligible to the new early Christian generations. One need only give as an instance the fact that the whole notion of the relation of man to God, man as the child of God, owing to him love, obedience, the whole notion of transgression, of sin, of

salvation and so forth, would not have been intelligible to the Greeks.

This comes out in the case of the kinds of metaphors which are used. If you read a psalm which says that before the coming of the Lord the Jordan turns upon itself, or the mountains skip like rams before the coming of the Lord, who is God and Father and King and so on, this is not the kind of metaphor which could have been intelligible to any Greek in the fifth or fourth or third century, and therefore is a symptom of a totally different world outlook, of a completely different conception of what men are, what the world is, what the relation is of men to men, of men to themselves, of men to the world

Similar great breaks occur when teleology is followed by mechanism, when the notion that everything in the universe has some kind of purpose and can be defined in terms of this purpose gradually becomes unintelligible or at any rate no longer used, which is the sort of thing which happened, presumably, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

I won't multiply examples. My only point is this, that it seems to me that the kind of thing I propose to talk about, which I've called the Romantic revolution, is the last big shift in human consciousness of this kind, compared to which nothing which occurred in the late nineteenth and in the twentieth century, including Marxism, psychoanalysis, and everything else which has supervened, which has had a powerful effect on human thought – nothing which happened later had an effect of comparable size. This seems to be the last big transforming step in human consciousness. This is the claim I should like to make good. And this seems to me to have occurred in the second third of the eighteenth century, and principally the source of it lies in Germany more than in any other country. That at any rate will be my thesis, which I shall attempt to defend.

Let me begin with the following generalisations, which are very large and very crude, and I'm afraid could be easily criticised in detail – and indeed if anyone wishes to do so I should be only too happy – and that is this. I think it's not altogether false or unfair to say that previous thought, both about matters of fact and about questions of value, both about what there is in the universe and about how men should act, how they should live, what the ends of life are, what is better than what, what is more right than what – questions of this

type, aesthetic questions about beauty and so on, about what is valuable – all these questions in the central tradition of the West rested upon three very large assumptions.

One of these can be briefly put by saying that wherever there is a genuine question there must somewhere be one true answer to it, all other answers being false. There may be profound disagreement about what the true answer is. For example, it may be said that the answer lies in the mind of God and has been revealed by him in sacred books; or alternatively that there are certain privileged persons, say prophets or priests, who possess this truth; or it may be said that it lies in observation and experiment, and the answer is known to scientists, and is discovered in laboratories or by common-sense observation; or it may be said that the answer is discovered by metaphysical insight.

Some would say that the answer can be discovered only by experts, persons specially trained to discover these answers, priests or scientists, or perhaps people peculiarly privileged, people who have not been corrupted by the civilisation of the great cities, pure-hearted children or pure-hearted natives or peasants or something of the sort, as was felt by people like Rousseau in the late eighteenth century.

Some think that it is the kind of answer which any man can discover if he tries hard enough; others only certain specialised or well-trained minorities. Again, all kinds of answers may be given about when and in what circumstances such answers may be obtained. Some would say that once upon a time we knew it in paradise, but then some fearful event occurred: the apple was eaten by Adam, or there was the Fall, or there was a flood, or there was some great disaster, after which the truth disappeared and is now fragmented and has to be put together by all kinds of agonised efforts. Others think that, on the contrary, this golden age did not occur before, but is coming, and we are gradually progressing towards it very painfully. Some say that men will never discover it, but at any rate it can be known to angels, or perhaps to God. Others say, on the contrary, that this may be known to men provided they take this or that step. Some may think that the answer is too difficult to obtain or too expensive to obtain, or other circumstances militate against it, or man is too weak or too sinful. But underlying all these various versions, about which bloody wars have been fought – and indeed, why should they not, since obviously human salvation

appears to rest on this? – whatever the answers may be, the common assumption is that a true answer to these problems exists.

The second assumption is that there is some method which can be discovered for the purpose of finding this answer: a method which is communicable, a method which is in principle public, a method which some people get right and other people get wrong. From which it follows that what is admired is success. People who get things right – sages, wise men – or in action, competent men, people who create states, people who create establishments, conquerors, people who fulfil the ends which they set themselves. And therefore the admiration is for success.

And it also follows that questions of value are assimilated to questions of fact. What you have to ask yourself is what is the world like? Then you ask yourself what men are like. Then you ask yourself what it is that men seek. If you are a teleologist, you must ask yourself what the purposes are which are planted in men by God, or by nature if you are an atheist. Alternatively, if you live in the eighteenth century and believe in science, you simply go, not to theologians, not to metaphysicians, but to sociologists or psychologists, and you say: What is it that men desire, what can men not help desiring, what does human nature crave for? And having discovered what it is that it craves for and what would satisfy it, you then proceed, if you can, to satisfy it in that way.

The programme is quite clear. This is what men are like. This is what reality is like. Getting reality wrong will invariably punish you. Crime and sin are simply getting reality wrong. This is the original platonic proposition from which it follows that virtue is knowledge. If you don't get reality right, if you go for the wrong ends, for example you may be inspired by greed or cruelty or the passions, then reality will get you in the end. And therefore the sanction is that you must adapt yourself or adjust yourself to reality, which can be discovered by some kind of species of special observation. As I say, some say intuition, some say scientific experiment, some say it's the sacred books, but whatever it may be, this is what you have to get right. If you get it right, you will be virtuous, you will be happy, you will be free, and all the other virtues shall be added unto you.

The third proposition, the third leg of this tripod, follows logically: that all ends, all values, must be compatible with one another. There can't be any clash of ultimate values. If to every question there is one true answer and one only, it follows logically

that one true proposition cannot be incompatible with any other true proposition. Therefore, if you get all the answers to all the questions right, you've solved the jigsaw puzzle. It's essentially that kind of metaphor. You put together all these propositions, and then you can work out what would be the ideal form of life. Having worked this out, you then know what it is you fall short of, and then if you can't get there, this is perhaps accident, perhaps bad luck, but at any rate you know what it is that a perfect life would be, if you can discover this. And therefore, you have the notion that this is a kind of secret treasure. The only point is to find the path there. If you can only discover what are the answers, the true answers, to the agonising questions which plague mankind about how to live and what to do, having discovered these answers, you may be sure a priori that they will form themselves into some sort of harmonious pattern. And having formed themselves into a harmonious pattern, this will be the solution of all human ills. And therefore the important thing is knowledge. The important thing is getting things right. The important thing is to be wise, and that is why sages are admired and fools are not. And crime and ignorance are ultimately assimilated to the same thing. Crime is some kind of breach in the perfect harmony which, in principle, could be obtained, by a man who makes a mistake about what it is that will truly make him or other people happy.

These are the legs of the tripod, and all these the particular movement of which I wish to speak, if it didn't actually destroy them, at any rate damaged very considerably, and made a great deal less plausible than they had been before. That is really the subject of this lecture.

Mind you, the proposition that there is a body of truth, that once you discover this truth, it is universal, that all men, in principle, can discover it, that it is true for all men in all places at all times, the only difficulty is to find out what it is: this kind of truth was questioned at various periods of human history. Nevertheless, it wasn't nearly as damaged as some historians of thought like to think. The Greek sophists, we know, preached a certain kind of relativism. That is, there is a famous sophist quoted by Aristotle who says: fire burns both here and in Persia, but institutions change under our very eyes.³

³ 'Some people think that all rules of justice are merely conventional, because whereas a law of nature is immutable and has the same validity everywhere, as fire

What they believe in Persia is not what they believe in Athens. People have very different beliefs, all kinds of different moral, political and other convictions and forms of behaviour occur, and there is no final truth to be obtained in these matters.

Similarly, I think various relativists in the eighteenth century, notably Montesquieu, also maintained that what is good for the Persians may not be good for the Parisians: that different circumstances create different ideals. The soil, the climate, the institutions, the accidents of history create different kinds of human character, different kinds of human institutions, different kinds of forms of life, and the ideals of human beings differ from one another in the way in which straight physical facts or straight mathematical propositions do not differ, and therefore there is no objectivity in the realm of values.

However, even such statements as this are not quite as damaging as they may seem. I think perhaps the most startling statement that was ever made was made by Montesquieu, which got him into grave trouble, when he said: 'When Montezuma said to Cortes that the Christian religion was all very well for Spaniards, but the religion of Aztecs did very well for his natives, for his fellow citizens, what he said', says Montesquieu, 'was not absurd.'⁴ This was extremely ill received by everybody, I may say, for obvious reasons. It was ill received by the Roman Church because if there is one truth, it cannot be true for Spaniards and not true for Aztecs. It was ill received by the materialist atheists for exactly the same reasons. If what Christianity says is a pack of nonsense, it must be equally nonsense for Spaniards. [laughter] The result was that this was a statement, as always in the case of persons in the middle of the road, that invariably involved them in acute attacks from both sides. However, even if you take the Montesquieu position, all he is really saying is: men have very similar ends wherever they may live. They all desire peace, they all desire security, they all desire a reasonable degree of liberty, they all prefer warmth to cold, they all prefer food to starvation, but if you live in a very large flat country, it can be

burns both here and in Persia, rules of justice are seen to vary.' *Nicomachean Ethics* 5. 7. 2, trans. H. Rackham (London, 1926), 295. The sophist IB means is presumably Protagoras.

⁴ 'When Montezuma was so obstinate as to say that the religion of the Spaniards was good for their country, and that of Mexico for his, he did not utter an absurdity.' Montesquieu, *De l'esprit des lois* (1758), book 24, chapter 24.

obtained in one way, if you live in a small hilly country, in another. If you live in Persia, circumstances are such that the means towards obtaining it and the kind of species which you want may differ from that which is sought by the citizens of Paris or of London. But even he supposed that there were certain common human ends, and these common human ends could be – one simply had to work out what was the best means of obtaining them in the very differing circumstances in which men lived.

Similarly with Hume, who was sometimes regarded as subverting these objective propositions. All that Hume was saying really was that if you ask what was good and what was right and what the ends of men were, this was to be sought not in some metaphysically objective realm in which some magic eye detected it, not some universal and eternal values which were out there in some metaphysical universe unaffected by human desires, human wishes or human character, but on the contrary, simply represented the desires of the human heart or the objects of the feelings of human approval. And therefore, in order to find out what it is that men want, instead of asking metaphysical questions, you have to ask sociological or psychological questions. It turns into some kind of empirical enquiry into what it is that men need, what it is that men value, what it is that men approve, and he believes there is an entity called nature which ultimately, in ordinary cases, reconciles human needs, brings people home after they're out of sorts, acts as a kind of benevolent housekeeper or doctor who ultimately cures people's wounds and creates a reasonable degree of human harmony if properly treated. So that I don't think these are very violent onslaughts on the original three propositions on which I think the Western tradition rests. The kind of revolution I speak of was a good deal more radical and had effects far more far-reaching than this.

The chief culprits, if you like, or the chief persons responsible, were persons, in particular one of them, who would have been deeply shocked by the responsibility I am about to affix to him and would have repudiated the results with a great deal of profound and sincere vehemence. I refer to the philosopher Kant. Kant regarded himself as a highly rational thinker, and yet the products of the, if you like, exaggeration or distortion of certain elements of his thought led to extraordinary consequences. Let me begin.

Kant, as we know, was obsessed by the moral problem of human liberty. That is to say, he believed that only those acts could be regarded as right which a man freely does of his own free will. If I do not exercise free choice in doing what I believe to be right – in other words, if I couldn't have done what I believe to be wrong – no special merit attaches to my doing what is right. If the French materialist philosophers are right, or if the utilitarians are right, if I am in fact a bundle of passions, if I am merely a three-dimensional object in nature, not unlike trees or animals, and if I am acted upon by forces similar to those which act on the rest of nature, if in fact I cannot help desiring what I desire, if I cannot help feeling the passions I feel, if I cannot help being attracted and repelled by what I am attracted and repelled by, then no particular merit attaches to the fact that I act under this kind of causal stimulation. I am just like an animal or just like a tree. Simply, my acts are calculable, predictable. I am simply an object in nature acted upon by external forces. The moral value of an act depends on the fact that I do it myself and that it is not done for me, that I act or impose my will upon the material and it is not imposed upon me, that I'm not pushed about, that I'm not in the hands of forces external to myself. Otherwise, what is meant by calling it mine and what is meant by attaching merit to it? If I cannot help doing what I do, why should it be praised? It might be beautiful or ugly, it might be useful or useless, it might be social or antisocial, but this can also be said about plants, about animals, about the wind, about anything else. Hence this passionate obsession with the notion of the alternatives or choices of human freedom.

That is why you will find in Kant an enormous emphasis upon the vices of paternalism. There are all kinds of vices which Kant may have disliked just as much as he did these. No doubt he disliked lying or cruelty as much as anyone else, but he lets the vials of his wrath pour out over the notion of paternalism. In a small but interesting essay called 'An Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"' he says that nothing is more degrading to human beings than being paternally managed by benevolent authority. If benevolent authority simply makes you do what they think is good for you and manages to propel you in certain directions or channel you along certain streams or arrange your life for you, this is the most ultimate degradation of all, because it treats you like a child or an animal. It is far better for a man to sin freely, to commit crimes

or indulge in vices himself, than to be prevented from doing so by some benevolent government which treats him as a mere chattel, as a mere piece of stuff which they mould or direct or condition or send along certain routes. And there is this terrific attack on paternalist government, by which no doubt he meant Frederick the Great, which arranges life for other people and which therefore robs man of that which makes men men. What makes men men is not their reason so much, which no doubt perhaps angels possess also, but their will which enables them to choose what is right when they might have chosen what is wrong. Hence this enormous emphasis in Kant on what he calls autonomy as opposed to heteronomy. Autonomy means that my acts proceed from my own untrammelled will, the will which can crush desire, the will which can impose itself on nature, the will which makes me do things against the stimulation of external or physical or emotional or any other stimuli over which I have no strict control.

The second proposition which follows from this kind of point of view is the view of nature. Now the conventional view of nature in the eighteenth century is that it is benevolent. Nature is an exquisite harmony which man alone breaks. Either you take it teleologically as a some kind of purpose-seeking pyramid or orchestra seeking a certain kind of goal which is set in each entity by the creator, or you take an atheist, naturalist view and you see it as an enormous mechanism or some vast organism of which all the parts are intelligible in terms of one another. And the only thing that is wrong about man is he doesn't understand his position in this particular organism or mechanism. When he understands it, he fits in. When he understands what it is he is and what it is he truly desires, what will make him happy, what will satisfy his wishes, he cannot, unless he's mad, not take those means which lead to these ends. And therefore nature is described as Mistress Nature, Dame Nature; it's praised, it has a great many compliments paid to it, it's regarded as 'divinely fair',⁵ it's regarded as beautiful, all kinds of compliments are lavished upon it as being that exquisite model which men alone sometimes stray from, set before their eyes, if only

⁵ [Probably a misremembered quotation from [Anthony Ashley Cooper (third Earl of Shaftesbury)], *The Moralists: A Philosophical Rhapsody* (London, 1709), 3. 1, where Philocles says: 'O glorious *Nature!* supremely Fair, and sovereignly good!']

they understood its divine harmony they would surely conform to it and play that part within it which they were designed to play.

In Kant the exact opposite occurs. Since freedom, autonomy, initiative, the self dominate here, since the value of an act or the value of human life depends on the fact that I will it freely, that it is mine, that I choose it when I might have chosen something else, nature becomes at best neutral stuff which I mould, at worst a kind of enemy which I must subjugate. And so you get the notion of nature as potentially hostile. Nature is simply the stuff in the world which seeks to subjugate me and which I resist.

Kant is almost pathologically terrified of determinism. He says: if those laws of causality which operate in nature, about which he wrote the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and in which he firmly believed, because the whole *Critique* was written to justify and explain Newtonian laws – if the great causal pattern which dominates nature also dominated man, that would be the end to morality, that would be the end to everything which is right and wrong, the end to the conception of obligation and duty. And therefore he must in some agonised way find room in which man can impose his will upon nature and not be dominated by her. Nature always seeks to reduce man to something like itself, to grass, to animals. Nature seeks to kill. Nature seeks to amalgamate the human body to the other bodies in the universe, to rub it out, to assimilate it to the general lifeless, amoral texture of nature, which cares for nothing and nobody. The business of man is to oppose himself to nature and to wreak his will upon her – wreak his will in a rational manner. That was Kant's method of insuring himself against some kind of wild subjectivism by which everybody will what they want and entered into perpetual conflict with each other. If a man is rational, that which he desires, that which he wills, will coincide with what any other rational man in his position would will.

Nevertheless, the important thing is the willing. Values are not out there, whether you know them or not. They are not objective stars shining in the heavens. Values consist of the fact that as a rational being, I commit myself to a certain course of action. I choose a certain course of action. That's what makes it valuable for me. That is the heart of the doctrine.

It's perfectly clear from this that the only thing which I'm free over, so Kant thought at any rate, were motives. I couldn't be responsible for consequences. Hence the opposition to utilitarian-

ism. No matter what my free act leads to, that doesn't matter. That has no moral value. The only thing which I can be free about is my own motive, and therefore, provided that I know that I act from a pure motive, that is enough. And therefore what matters is purity of motive, the correct condition of the human will. The consequences must look after themselves. For them, I'm not responsible. There other men come in, nature comes in, all kinds of factors over which I have no control.

If you ask about the historical origins of this, and I don't want to go into that at great length, partly owing to my incompetence to do it, and my ignorance, there is this to be said, that there is a certain tendency on the part of societies which are politically terribly depressed, societies which, as in Germany, were ruled by 300 princes, in which individual political initiative was almost zero, in which chaos and irrationality reigned, societies of this kind, there is a certain tendency for sensitive men to retreat into themselves. This is what happened after Alexander the Great's conquests in Greece, when after the great political treatises of Plato and Aristotle, you suddenly have a generation of Stoics and Epicureans whose only concern is to teach people not to mind things, not to be buffeted about by the awful storms of these warlords who succeeded Alexander. So in Germany, where the individual citizen was politically almost entirely impotent, and very much the creature of the whim of all kinds of neither very gifted nor very competent princelings – where there is a situation of this kind, there is a certain tendency to retreat in depth. There is a tendency to say: I will protect myself, I will contract the vulnerable surface; what matters is what I can control. Since I can control very little, since I can't get what I want, I must teach myself to want only what I can get. The tyrant burns my house: very well, I don't like houses. The tyrant starves me: I will teach myself not to desire to eat food. The tyrant destroys my wife: I will cure myself of all love of persons. Somehow or other, I shall contract myself into a tiny scope where the one thing which the tyrant can't get at is my immortal soul: this was in the days before brainwashing and things of this kind. He can't get at that. This alone can be protected. What I can protect, I shall protect. I am free, I am free somewhere. My immortal spirit is free. Anything which the tyrant can destroy, anything which circumstances can destroy, anything which is precarious, I must lose the love for. It's a kind of Buddhist sermon in a sense. And I think that had a certain effect,

certainly upon thinkers of this particular type, and in general upon the Germans.

Here were the French, who were lauded in the world, who were obviously the top nation in a great many senses, whose art dominated the universe, whose armies and whose techniques were at that time the envy of the world: obviously the primary nation, looking with disdain and justified pride upon this dreary provincial collection of little principalities in Germany, which had contributed, or appeared to have contributed, not very much to human civilisation in the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. Under this kind of impact – under this kind of insult, if you like – after the Thirty Years War, after the humiliations suffered by the Germans, it's a very natural thing for people to contract into themselves and to try to say to themselves: What do these vaunted conquerors boast about? Yes, they have the arts. Yes, they have the arts of life. They may be militarily strong. They may have a splendid political system. They may have great magnificence. They may paint marvellous pictures and enjoy all kinds of material goods, but they haven't got what we have. They haven't got the inner spirit of man. Surely, we cannot be as humble and as degraded as they make us out to be. Surely we must have something. We *have* something. We have some kind of inward force. All these smooth, bewigged persons dashing about the salons and the drawing rooms are ultimately empty, hollow, superficial, dreary persons who don't understand the inner human life, the fact that all that matters is motive, all that matters is purity of soul, all that matters is the inner spiritual aspect of man, which only we Germans understand. That is why music is our art, which is an inner art, and painting is their art, which is an outer art, and so on.

This is only by way of accounting for the acute Gallophobia, the extreme resentment of French superiority in the eighteenth century and the enormous emphasis upon the inner life, inner freedom, the inner man, something which they can't touch, something which doesn't depend on wealth, on power, on external factors of any kind. Above all, the glorification of man as a free individual, not dependent upon all these worldly goods of which the French appear to have the monopoly. This is, I hope, not too crude and not too false a set of sociological suggestions about what it was that put German thinkers into this particular mood towards the end of the eighteenth century.

Now, if I may get back. If Kant said these things and objected to paternalism and believed in inner freedom and regarded nature as a hostile force to be moulded rather than to be followed, nature not as an exemplar to be imitated, but on the contrary as stuff to be shaped in accordance with our own free will, others took this to an even greater length. Take for example his pupil, the dramatist Schiller. Schiller was not only a great dramatist and poet, but he was a highly competent professional philosopher who could easily have held a chair in any university, not merely then, but I think perhaps now. And his interpretation of Kant, although somewhat exaggerated, is of interest in this particular movement which I wish to examine.

In quite an interesting essay in which he talks about the *Medea*, he says something of this kind, which is certainly new in its time and revolutionary in character. The *Medea* which he talks about is, I think, not perhaps the *Medea* of Euripides, it's probably the *Medea* of Corneille, but still, whichever *Medea* it is, the story is the same. It's probably familiar to everybody here. Medea, as you know, was the daughter of the Queen of Colchis, and Jason, who set out in pursuit of the golden fleece, was helped by her to get hold of the fleece, and they come back from Asia Minor where it's found, and then Jason marries her and has children by her, and then abandons her for some other lady, and Medea is violently jealous, and in order to punish Jason, proceeds, according to one story, to kill her children by the sword, according to another story, to boil them alive. Schiller doesn't say that boiling the children alive is a virtuous act, or in any way something to be approved of, but he says the tragedy of the *Medea* is due to the fact that Medea exhibits marvellous force of transcendental will.

The natural inclination of a mother is to love her children. The natural inclination of human beings is to drift downstream. Here is Medea, who, however wicked she may be, is a gigantic figure because she arrests mother love, she goes against her natural instincts, she breaks her nature, and in order to demonstrate her fury and her rage, she proceeds to a free act, which is that of opposition to and defiance of nature, defiance of convention, defiance of all the forces which, normally speaking, make one what existentialists now call inauthentic, make one flow down the stream, make one a weak character, other-directed, and all these other expressions which are nowadays fashionable.

Medea resists all this. Here is Jason, who is a perfectly decent Athenian, or Thracian, or whatever he was, just an ordinary sort of *homme moyen Athénien*⁶ or whatever it is, who first marries Medea, then he wanders off with some other lady – this is common enough – and behaves in a perfectly normal uninteresting bourgeois sort of manner [*laughter*], and therefore is of no possible interest to a tragedian, no possible interest for a drama. But Medea is a gigantic figure – monstrous, but gigantic. That’s why it’s a drama. That’s why it’s a tragedy. Those human beings are truly human beings who defy the elements. Those human beings are truly human beings who defy nature, defy their own instinct, and do with their life what they want. In the case of Medea, what she did was not good, but at least she did, at least she acted. Jason didn’t act at all. He was acted upon. He was, in our sense of the word, in Schiller’s sense of the word, of no interest whatever.

That’s why Schiller thinks that Othello is a genuine character in tragedy, because he acted – he thinks, at any rate – as he wills, he might not have done it, whereas Iago is a kind of animal who is merely acted upon by jealousy, by envy, by violent hatred, and cannot help it. Once a man cannot help acting as he did, he’s of no possible interest. He’s not much of a human being. He is more like a plant or an animal, and therefore, in this sense, doesn’t distinguish himself, because it’s the will, it’s the capacity for determining oneself, which is the central characteristic of men as men. Similarly, you see in the famous tragedy *The Robbers*, which had a great effect upon this generation and upon all Romantics, there is Karl Moor, who is the hero. Karl Moor is the hero who is outraged by the wicked conventions of his family and of his time and of his place, is outraged by them because false values are followed, because his father is a dreary and uninteresting and not very nice man; his brother is a villain; the moral intentions of men are frustrated in his home; and so he sets up as a kind of Robin Hood. He sets up as a robber, and he commits a great many crimes. We’re not meant to approve of Karl Moor for committing these crimes, but we are meant to admire him more than anybody else in the tragedy, because at least he’s a man. At least he kicks against the pricks. At least he

⁶ ‘Average Athenian man’. The mythical Jason hailed from Iolcus in Magnesia in northern Greece.

asserts, even though in some perverted fashion, the right of a man to make his own moral decisions.

Until this moment, tragedy is regarded as due to a mistake. A mistake which perhaps you can't avoid, but still a mistake. Tragedy is due to the infliction of pain on human beings because they haven't got something right, because they don't understand themselves, because they don't understand nature, because they don't understand morality, because of the acts of criminals who mistake the nature of true values, or because the gods have blinded Oedipus, or blinded Clytemnestra, or blinded whoever it is in the Greek tragedy, to the true nature of reality, in which case they can't be blamed. Nevertheless, it's due to some kind of error, and if the error hadn't happened, the tragedy would not have occurred. So that all tragedy is in principle avoidable.

Once you get to this position, it's no longer avoidable. If I will X and you will Y, and X is not compatible with Y, we are bound to collide. And if we collide, there is pain, and there is suffering, and there is violence, and there is conflict. And therefore the question now arises whether the sheer emphasis on the will doesn't itself lift these values from the cognitive field.

Let me say something else in this connection. As you know, the general eighteenth-century theories of art are that art, like everything else, has its rules, according to which there are true objective answers. If we went to Joshua Reynolds's lectures, he would have explained to you that there was a thing called the Great Tradition, so that the way to portray heroes was different from the way of portraying villains. The way to paint King David had nothing to do with whether David was large or small, or whether his appearance was mean or noble. Since he was a hero, he had to be painted in a certain fashion. The Platonic theory of art, which still prevailed in the eighteenth century, is that there are certain archetypes, there are certain positive rules of painting, and certain ideals which have to be approximated to, which only the genius of the artist penetrates, and to which he does his best to approximate his paintings, working as he does in empirical materials.

But if you look at the writings of the Russian revolutionary Herzen in the nineteenth century, he asks you: Where is the painting

before it's painted? Where is the song before it's sung?⁷ And he means you to say: Nowhere. The painting is not there to be copied. The painting is invented. The will invents it, or some creative capacity invents it, invents it in a certain sense out of nothing. It's like a walk. An unwalked walk is not a walk. An unpainted painting is not a painting. An unsung song is not a song. An undanced dance is not a dance. There aren't objective entities which are copied. There aren't objective rules which have to be discovered by some kind of species of painful enquiry.

At this point, because of the enormous emphasis on the will as being the characteristic of man, you get a shift from the notion that the truth about behaviour, what to do, how to be, and about aesthetic activity too, what to create and even what to admire, that instead of its being an object of discovery in some sense, it is not. It's not discovered, it's invented. It's not found, it's made. This is a very large leap in the history of the human consciousness. Let me give you examples of how it proceeds.

It really does proceed, it seems to me, from this original Kantian premise that we make our life as we make it, by committing ourselves to the values to which we commit ourselves, because we are the beings we are – in his case, rational beings. Let me read you some passages from Kant's rather treacherous disciple Fichte, which will make this, I think, a little clearer.

Schiller already said, 'All other things must, we alone will.'⁸ And 'As creatures of reason, we feel independence even of the Almighty. Even he cannot destroy our autonomy or determine our will against our principles.'⁹ This is already a declaration of independence, against all previous rules. Fichte says, 'Man shall determine himself and never allow anything foreign to himself to determine him. He should be what he is because he wills it and ought to will it.'¹⁰ 'I do not accept what nature offers because I must, I believe it because I

⁷ This question is often cited by IB as one asked by Herzen, but it appears rather to be a misremembering of Herzen's question 'What is the purpose of the song the singer sings?' See RT2 xiv/2.

⁸ 'All other things must: man is the being that wills.' 'Ueber das Erhabene' (1801): *Schillers Werke: Nationalausgabe* (Weimar, 1943–) xxi 38. 8.

⁹ 'Vom Erhabenen' (1793), *ibid.* xx 183.

¹⁰ *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800), book 3, 'Glaube': *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Sämtliche Werke* [SW], ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6), SW ii 297.

will.¹¹ This is a very startling statement. Normally speaking, if you're a philosopher, you say: Of course, I accept what nature offers because I must. That's what Descartes said. It's there, I see it, and I can't lie. It's there for Locke, too. Nature offers these things to me. This is what my experience is. These are the colours I see. These are the shapes I perceive. This is the life I observe. And therefore, if I'm to be truthful, and if I'm to be accurate, I simply report or describe what I see, and try to produce some kind of general laws for the purpose of predicting what will happen next, coordinating my experiences, and the rest of it. And that is what science is, and that is what common sense is.

But if Fichte is right, I do not accept what nature offers because I must. I don't have to. I do it because I will, because I choose what I choose quite freely. 'If man allows laws to be made for him by the will of others, he thereby makes himself a beast. He injures his inborn human dignity.'¹² 'Man may not make any reasonable being either virtuous or wise or happy against his own will',¹³ only if he chooses it himself. 'To be subject to law means to be subject to one's own insight.'¹⁴ And then he says, 'We do not act because we know. We know because we are called upon to act',¹⁵ which is quite a strong statement.

In other words, Fichte's argument is of this kind. If you ask what makes a statement true, you always ask for some ground for it. But this ground may also be criticised when you ask for a further ground, and then for a further ground, then for a further ground, and this process will go on for ever. But it doesn't go on for ever because, in the end, we have to live. In the end, we have to act. And therefore, we simply commit ourselves to a certain course of action. We determine the universe to be what it is simply because we cannot help willing it to be of the kind that we will it to be. And this is the kind of universe there is: the egoist universe is different from the altruist universe; the rich man's universe is different from the poor

¹¹ *ibid.*, 256.

¹² *Beitrag zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publikums über die französische Revolution* (1793), book 1, chapter 1, SW vi 82.

¹³ *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794), lecture 2, SW vi 309.

¹⁴ 'Ueber Errichtung des Vernunftreiches', SW vii 574.

¹⁵ *op. cit.* (note 9 above), 263.

man's universe; the nice man's universe is different from the nasty man's universe. But the point is that the important thing is that we should be free, that we should control ourselves.

You will find that as a result of this, a whole new set of values spring into the world, which really, comparatively speaking, are unknown before. This is a bold statement, but I should like to make it all the same, which is this: that until, roughly speaking, the middle of the eighteenth century, perhaps a little earlier than that, nobody really admired the virtue of sincerity very much. So far as I know, in fact, nobody did.

For example, some Calvinist in the seventeenth century wouldn't say: Of course what these papists believe is false, and by preaching it they drive souls to perdition; nevertheless, the sincerity and the passion and the integrity and the dedication with which this particular Jesuit believes what he believes are so great and so pure, one has to hand it to him, one must admire such absolute, self-sacrificial devotion. You would not get a Catholic saying: What Luther believes has damned souls, the most dangerous poison that's ever been poured into the human soul; nevertheless, there is no doubt about his complete honesty; there is no doubt about his total preparedness to be a martyr to his views, no matter how absurd. You will not get that. On the contrary, if you think that the enemy is sincere, if you think the enemy really believes all this dangerous nonsense, he is the more dangerous and perhaps the madder. You might, if you are a crusader and you fight against the wicked Muslim, if the Muslim is brave, if the Muslim fought well and you kill him, you wouldn't spit on his corpse if you had any decency in you, because you think that it's sad that such virtues should be dedicated to such nonsense, but you wouldn't say: However foolish his ideals, the mood, the attitude, the emotion with which he does it are really worthy of every admiration.

If you get to the nineteenth century, this is no longer true. For example, if you read the writings of the early German Romantics of the nineteenth century, you will find that what they value is motive: purity of motive, sincerity, integrity, above all not selling out. If I believe one thing and you believe another thing, and these things are very sacred to each of us and they are not compatible with each other, then, by God, we must fight. We must each fight for our own ideal. We fight a duel. In this duel, I may kill you or you may kill me or we may kill each other. Any of these solutions is obviously

preferable to the one solution which is disreputable, which is compromise of any kind. Above all, we mustn't compromise, because if we compromise, we're selling out. If we compromise, we are compromising those ideals which alone justify our life. Our will, which has pitched itself, which has committed itself to a particular ideal with great purity after deep thought, is now being bent, and therefore taken back for the sake of some unworthy thing which we know to be lower than our ideal, for the sake of peace, for the sake of security, for the sake of wealth, for the sake of common sense, all of which are contemptible ideals in comparison with that which truly matters. And it matters not so much because it's universally true, because any man who sees it would see it to be true, as because it's mine, because I, with my own free, untrammelled will, have committed myself in this particular direction.

That, of course, leads to fearful subjectivism and relativism and indeed to a great deal of bloodshed as well. This is the growth of this particular thing. If you looked at the students of German universities, let's say at the beginning of the nineteenth century, in 1810, 1811, in places like Jena or Heidelberg, you would find they no longer placed value on wisdom, which was the old ideal, as I told you, on men who knew, on men who got things right. No longer wisdom, no longer peace, no longer security; certainly not wealth, certainly not success. Minorities are better than majorities. There is something vulgar about success. Failure is better than success. Martyrdom is better than triumph. Of course martyrdom is a very sacred value, but the martyrdom of a Christian was martyrdom in the name of the truth. You had to be a martyr because this was the only truth, and the truth alone will save you or make you free, but to be a martyr to something which is not true, to be a martyr to something false, is merely pathetic. This is no longer so in the nineteenth century. Here, martyrdom is valued for its own sake. The important thing is not so much the ideal which you follow, the important thing is the motive for which you follow it.

Balzac's story 'The Unknown Masterpiece', 'Le Chef-d'œuvre inconnu', is a story about a mad painter who covers his canvas with endless daubs of paint. At first, something is discernible, but ultimately, it gets covered with the most fearful chaos of paints and dots and so forth, in which he perceives a beatific vision of some kind, but nobody else can see anything. Balzac's point is, although the painter is mad, and although what he has produced is in no sense

a masterpiece, yet it is better for a man to be like that and to produce what is in him, whatever the voices tell him, whatever the sacred calling within him urges him on to do: *das Aufgegebene*,¹⁶ as Fichte would say, that which is my duty, that which I have appointed to be my end, my task, rather than sell out to the market and produce picture postcards.

The great symbolic figure of the whole nineteenth century as an artist – and what has really happened here, of course, is the superposition of an aesthetic model on a political model, and on a moral model; always the history of thought uses models from other successful regions: mechanical models, biological models, psychological models, geometrical models; in this case, the aesthetic model – the figure who dominates the nineteenth century in all the advertisements is Beethoven. The point about Beethoven is he sits in his garret and he is ignorant, he is stupid, he is rude, he is not particularly nice, he is disagreeable to other people, he is mean about money, he is dirty, but he hasn't sold out. [*laughter*] The point is that he has preserved his inner integrity and he really does observe the inner light within him. The fact that Beethoven is a genius helps [*laughter*], because it means that the works are in fact of such a kind as to please a large number of persons, but even if you weren't – that is my point – the value of Beethoven consists in the fact that he's a man of principle. He's a man of principle who does not yield to values which he knows to be lower than the voices within him which speak and tell him that he must express his true nature in the only proper way in which he can express it, that is by writing music.

Haydn and Mozart would have been extremely surprised if they'd been told that they were sacred vessels, that they were selves, that they were egos who had to express themselves in a particular fashion, and therefore that any derogation from some inner voice, from some inner light which they had to cultivate, would have been a monstrous betrayal and a piece of dreadful selling out and lack of integrity. They were simply artisans, masters, artists who produced goods for a market, tried to make them as beautiful as possible, in which case he thought they would sell them well, and if they didn't come off, they expect them not to sell quite so well. But the notion of an artist as a sacred vessel whose business it is to defy the world, and the whole notion of defiance as something good for its own

¹⁶ 'The assigned task'.

sake, something which is then celebrated by Byron in the case of all those heroes who are outcasts but nevertheless grander than the people who surround them, because these people drift along some kind of mechanical stream and do not understand what they are, and have a kind of half life; the notion that somebody who looks upon the world with contempt, and who forges his way through it, and imposes his personality upon it, is always something grander than people who yield, who compromise, who are weak, who settle down, who make their peace with authority, who work by consensus and all the rest of it – that is the original Romantic notion. And this is something which is ultimately a kind of product of the doctrines of Kant as refracted by Schiller, by Fichte and by other German Romantic philosophers.

Let me say something further about this. There is also another doctrine involved here which perhaps forms a kind of confluence with the doctrine of which I speak. And that is this. The metaphysical German philosophers of the end of the eighteenth century, very much under the influence of which I've spoken, also believed that reality itself is a kind of subject, is a kind of secularisation of religion; that reality is a kind of flow, if you like, a kind of river which itself moves towards some kind of goal. Before this, and in our own time indeed, there is a notion that there is a thing called the nature of things, the *rerum natura*. There is a structure of things which is out there – physical, chemical, biological, psychological – and there are certain experts – scientists, philosophers – who are able to analyse and describe this nature of things, which is an objective entity subject to observation by science or by whatever other means. If you really expand the notion of the will and no longer believe that human beings, merely, are persons who have wills, but that objects, nature itself, is a kind of endless striving after something or other, which is the view of the wilder German metaphysicians, then you will fall into a kind of Bergsonian state. You will say: Any attempt to try to pin this down kills it. To render movement by means of rest, to render life by means of death, to describe a work of art by giving precise formulae, is to arrest the flow, not to understand it properly. That's what Goethe said about the German aestheticians of the eighteenth century: that they caught beauty like a butterfly, and they dissected it, with the result that all its flowers, all its colours had gone, and the poor little animal now was something grey and something uninteresting.

This is what Blake was after, who was a very real expression of this kind of mood. When Blake says, 'A Robin Red breast in a Cage / Puts all Heaven in a Rage',¹⁷ the cage which Blake speaks of is science. The cage he speaks of is Newton. The great enemies are Newton and Locke. And Newton and Locke are enemies of mankind because they believe in determinism, because they believe in science, because for them life is a kind of structure which is bound together by rigid laws in which there is no possibility of spontaneity, of freedom, of self-expression, of the flight of love. And Blake perpetually carries warfare into the country. 'Reasoning [is] secret Murder',¹⁸ violent manslaughter. Wordsworth, in milder language, said exactly the same.¹⁹ Locke and Newton are despots who 'form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them / The eternal laws of God.'²⁰ 'Jesus [...] acted from impulse, not from rules.'²¹ 'Jesus & His Apostles & Disciples were all artists. [...] Art is the Tree of Life. [...] Science is the Tree of Death.'²² This is a very common mood at the time of which I speak.

And that is why, because nature is a flux, and because you can only understand the living forces of nature by identifying yourself with them, and because any attempt to produce rules, to describe, to produce formulae, to be exact, to produce a scientific textbook, to produce a political or a social constitution with rules and regulations in which peaceful people can live under the rule of law, all these things are regarded as imposition of prison walls upon the free, untrammelled, boiling, violent human spirit, upon the purity of our souls, which seek their own ideals and will not submit to ideals imposed upon them by others. This is an extreme anarchism of attitude.

This is very well when it applies to the arts, when, let us say, it applies to Beethoven. It's comparatively harmless to interpret Beet-

¹⁷ William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence' [1803] (1863), lines 5–6: *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford, 1978) (hereafter Bentley), ii 1312.

¹⁸ *Jerusalem: The Emanation of the Giant Albion* (1820), plate 64, line 20, Bentley i 555.

¹⁹ 'Sweet is the lore which Nature brings; / Our meddling intellect / Mis-shapes the beauteous forms of things:— / We murder to dissect.' 'The Tables Turned' (1798), line 28: *Lyrical Ballads* (London, 1798), 188.

²⁰ *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), plate 28, lines 6–7, Bentley i 282.

²¹ *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1793), plates 23–4, Bentley i 96.

²² 'Laocoon' (1820?), aphorisms 16, 17, 19, Bentley i 665–6.

hoben in this fashion. But of course more sinister interpretations occur too. If you consider who is the other person who dominates the whole imagination of the early part of the nineteenth century, the other person is Napoleon. What is admired about Napoleon by the people of whom I speak is not his success as a military commander, because that can be done by scientific means. This is just adaption of means to ends. This is mere success, which is contemptible. Nor the *Code Napoléon*, which regulates France and abolishes feudalism and creates a rational system on what has previously been a fearful, overgrown wood of conflicting rules and regulations of an ancient, unabrogated kind. Not that at all. The important thing about Napoleon is that he is a great creator or artist – in politics, not in painting – and he creates human states. He creates societies. And the material with which he creates these societies are human beings. He conceives passionate dreams, which are his own. And he uses human beings for the purpose of creating these enormous works of art of which human beings are the material. That is what makes him magnificent. The first man who conceived politics as a true art, and the state as a work of art, something which had been said in the Renaissance, but never really practiced until then.

You may say: What about the unfortunate human beings who are the raw material? Beethoven uses sounds, Delacroix uses paints – these cannot complain. But what about the human beings who are the raw material of this enormous demiurge? The answer of the more violent Romantics is: There are two kinds of human beings, said Fichte. There are the creative, there are those who by means of intuitions of genius, catch the intimations, understand the flow of life, understand what it is that is truly creative and truly living in nature and in the world; and there are the unfortunate other ones who are mere echoes of these sounds: the unfortunate, unimaginative, ordinary, middle-class, uninteresting, dreary majority of mankind.

And it is the business of the creative to do something for the uncreative. It's a privilege, although Fichte didn't say that because he was in fact against Napoleon, because he believed that these creative persons were more to be found in Germany than in France. But apart from this mere slight historical aberration on his part, the notion which spread itself was that if you were one of these unfortunate passive human beings, who did not have the creative

urge within you, who didn't identify yourself with the springs of life which beat about in nature, or impose your sacred will and realise ideals for their own sakes – and, you must remember, the whole notion of doing things for their own sake, no matter what the consequences, the idea of disinterestedness, is born then, really: the idea that any ideal, no matter how terrible, provided it has no profitable consequences, is nevertheless nobler than not having it – the person who really believed that, believed that the dull, dreary human beings who were not capable of that were privileged if they were lifted to a great height by one of these great creators of states – they might suffer, they might be in agony, they might even be killed in the process; nevertheless, they are lifted to a height to which their own base natures would never have lifted them.²³ And therefore this is a splendid thing to have done.

And this, of course, is the origin of the worship of political heroes, of political leaders, of extreme devaluing of reason, and of all the Fascist monstrosities which followed their own century. One must never blame a previous age for the way in which it develops later. It's always a wrong thing to blame this or that thinker or this or that man for the ways in which his ideas have become transmogrified historically. Nevertheless, if you are interested in the origins of Fascism, in the origins of Romantic politics in that sense, that is the particular place in which it does begin. It begins in this particular form of Napoleon-worship. Let me once again say something to you.

Take the word 'idealism'. I don't mean as it's used by philosophers, but I mean as it's used by ordinary men. Idealism means that you reject wealth, you reject success, you don't sell out, you follow your ideals wherever they may lead you. This is a new notion. It's a new notion because in the eighteenth century, although the word 'idealism' is not often used, the word 'visionary' is sometimes used, and it's a word of contempt. Now take the word 'realism': realism in the nineteenth century. When a man says, 'I'm afraid I'm rather a realist', what he means is, 'I'm about to tell a lie', or do something peculiarly shabby. This notion of 'realist', the idea that this is what 'realist' means, is a product of the corresponding value of the word

²³ This ungrammatical sentence has been left uncorrected for the benefit of those who are following the transcript while listening to the recording of the lecture. Its sense is reasonably clear.

'idealism', which is something new. The word 'idealism' means: No matter what the goal, provided you are ready to die for it, that's what matters.' The goal may be absurd. That's not for you to judge. The important thing is you are ready to die. If you are ready to die, you are all right. If you are not, you are not.

This is, in effect, extreme early nineteenth-century Romanticism. It's quite obvious that, as a result of this, the whole notion of objective values, which all men can understand and accept; of rules, whether in aesthetics or in ethics or in politics; of certain kinds of respect for the rule of law; of the discovery of what men in general need, reliance upon the sciences, upon sociology, upon psychology, becomes weakened. And the emphasis on motive and on sincerity becomes very great. As I said before, I don't believe that respect for integrity and sincerity as such, no matter what their context, is something which is known before the period of which I speak. After that, it has a kind of unceasing career. And, indeed, I think we are the product of it.

I don't wish to talk about the great ramifications of this doctrine: certainly doctrines like those of Nietzsche, who distinguished various types of morality, each of which was valid in its own way and between which it was impossible to judge; doctrines of existentialists in our day, who also believe that to try to justify particular forms of idealism or particular forms of action by referring to the nature of the universe is a subterfuge, because the nature of the universe offers no arguments for this rather than that action. An act is something to which I commit myself, and the attempt to bring in the nature of the universe to justify me, for example by explaining it metaphysically or by explaining it theologically or by explaining it sociologically, is just an attempt to evade my personal responsibility, an attempt to make the universe or history responsible for something which I am responsible for alone. Doctrines of this type, and every kind of irrationalism, anarchism, Sorel's doctrines, the doctrine of emotive ethics – all these are various outgrowths of this attitude, of this blow delivered against the classical tradition by this interpretation of a doctrine which I think originally begins, no doubt, in early Christianity, but becomes secularised in the work of Kant and his disciples, even though, as I say, Kant would have been horrified to think that this sort of thing had happened. This, I think, is the great break, the great breach, with tradition, with the three original propositions – that all

questions have true answers, that there are methods of discovering them, and that all values are compatible with one another – all of which have now become compromised. Either values are, individual, or perhaps the self is not an individual at all. Perhaps the self is something else. Perhaps the self is a race. Perhaps the self is a religion. Perhaps the self is a Church. Perhaps the self is History. You blow up, you inflate the self into some larger entity. And then you justify what is done by the fact that this particular self needs self-expression.

That, of course, is the origin of nationalism. Instead of the individual self as in Byron, you now get an entity called the nation, and it imposes its collective will upon other nations or upon the world. Or you have a class, and it imposes its collective will upon other classes. The very notion that what is valuable is always the moulding of the material by some kind of self, by an ego, whether it's an individual ego or a curious metaphysical collective ego, which forges its way through the world by going for certain ideals and by imposing its patterns upon passive reality: that, I think, is the heritage of Romanticism.

Let me say one word,²⁴ and I shall cease. If you ask where we are now, because it certainly has a great effect upon the present, not only in the case of Fascist doctrines, but in the case of all kinds of irrationalist doctrines, in the case of the whole anti-consensus mentality, in the sense of everybody who desires to be free, whether they are beatniks or hippies or flower children or revolted students, all of whom protest against being boxed up in some kind of objectively determined order, who protest exactly against what these Romantics protested against, against having their lives regulated by some kind of objective structure – if you ask where we stand, we are curiously enough children of both worlds. If you say: What do we value? Do we value motive or do we value consequence? In the eighteenth century, there is no doubt what they valued. If you ask somebody at that period whether Frederick the Great was a better man or a more valuable person than, say, Torquemada – let us assume that Torquemada was doing what he did for the purest possible motives, in order to save human souls. He tortured a large number of persons to death in order to save their souls, and his motives were idealistic and disinterested. Let us assume that

²⁴ He then utters 1,800 words ...

Frederick the Great was one of the most egoistic, cruel, nasty and altogether detestable human beings who ever walked the earth, who reorganised Prussia, liberated people from the oppression of the minor princelings, brought a great deal of material welfare, brought the sciences, raised the arts, and in every other respect gave a much freer and much more interesting and much more valuable life to his fellow citizens and indeed to Europe at large.

Let us assume all this. If you ask in the eighteenth century which of these was more valuable, there would be no possible doubt. You don't need to be a Benthamite to say that Torquemada was a disaster – at best, a poor fool – whereas Frederick the Great conferred a great many benefits on mankind.

We are not so sure. We are not so sure because we don't like to ignore motives. We say: Yes, on the one hand, of course Frederick the Great's consequences were splendid. On the other hand, he was a very bad man. Torquemada, of course, did cause a very great deal of suffering, but individually, subjectively and personally there was something honourable, dignified and even self-sacrificing about him. And this is new. Let me give you an example of what I mean, from the works of Carlyle. Compare, for example, the treatment of Muhammad by Voltaire and by Carlyle. It's quite significant. Voltaire wrote a play on Muhammad, which was really directed against the Roman Church, in which Muhammad is regarded as a false, perfidious, cruel and ignorant monster responsible for intolerance and most dreadful sufferings on the part of innocent men. And this is simply an anti-clerical play and a great plea for toleration and for reason and for light. Carlyle, on the other hand, in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*, says that Muhammad was 'a fiery mass of life, cast up from the great bosom of nature herself', a man of 'deep, great, genuine sincerity'.²⁵

The point about Carlyle is he couldn't care less about what the Koran said. He didn't read the Koran, and he was not interested in whether it was true or false. The point, though, was that Muhammad was a fiery mass of life. And because he was a fiery mass of life, he imposed himself upon mankind, he transformed the lives of these people. That's what made a man great. What made a man great was the quality of his will, his passion, his sincerity and his dedication to

²⁵ 'The Hero as Prophet': Thomas Carlyle, *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History*, ed. Michael K. Goldberg and others (Berkeley etc., 1993), 40, 39.

a purpose: deep, great, genuine sincerity, unlike the eighteenth century, which he regarded as a second-rate century because nobody except Rousseau was sincere.

This is a genuine shift of values. And if you ask where do we stand, we oscillate between two worlds. On the one hand, we believe in consequence. On the other hand, we believe in motive. We give marks for beneficence, for actually producing consequences which we think make human beings happier or nicer or wiser or better. And on the other hand we give marks for sincerity, integrity, devotion, no matter how misconceived. And this is new. This really is new. And we don't quite know where we stand.

Let me say one more thing, and I really will have done. What this really means is that the notion of objectivity in ethics and in politics, of the possibility of discovering objective truths, has become gravely compromised – not wholly, but gravely. If a man comes along to you and says, 'Twice two is always seventeen-and-a-half', and you say about this man, 'Why is he saying this?', and someone says, 'You know, he's not saying it for money. He's not saying it as the first line of a poem. He's not saying it in order to shock you. He's not saying it because he doesn't know what he's saying, because words just fall out from him. He says it because he believes it. Not only does he believe it, but he's prepared to lay down his life for the principle that twice two is always seventeen-and-up-a-half, neither more nor less.' You wouldn't immediately be transported by respect for this man. At best, you would think he was unfortunately deranged, perhaps not mad enough to be certified, but certainly not sane, not worth listening to any further. You would be sorry for him, even if you weren't angry with him. If a man said, 'Grass everywhere looks red', the same emotions would occur.

But in the case of values, you tend to say, if someone produces values which are wholly opposed to yours, and who says the important thing, let us say, is to die in battle, or the important thing is always to fight wars, never to cease – the heroic qualities appear in them: peace is detestable, or whatever it may be, which may be directly contrary to your Quaker conscience. Supposing you meet a man like that, you don't immediately call him certifiable. You say: Well, he apparently has a very different scale of values from my own. And therefore, in the case of ethical or political judgements, in cases of value, you allow for the possibility of divergence of a much wider kind than you would in the case of factual statements.

But this was not always so: that is my point. It is really the Romantic Revolution which did this, for better or for worse. We don't go absolutely to the fullest extent. If a man comes along and produces moral ideas which are completely incompatible with your own, you tend on the whole, as I say, not to say that he is certifiable. You may think him dangerous, but you think that in some sense he is entitled to his own *Weltanschauung*, and that *Weltanschauungs* differ. If it goes too far, you stop. In Hume's case, if there is a man who is prepared to destroy the entire world in order to cure an itch in his little finger, you think that goes too far. You don't say: I see this man has a different scale of values from mine; I don't think that itching in my little finger is worth quite that much. Imagine the case of a man who goes about putting pins into people. You say, 'Why do you do this?' The man says, 'Because it gives me pleasure.' And then you say, 'Oh, why does it give you pleasure? Because it causes pain?' 'No, no,' says the man. 'The fact that other people's pain causes pleasure is quite normal. Sadism is normal. No, I just like putting pins into resilient surfaces.' And then you say to him, 'Look, but supposing I substitute some tennis balls, would it be just the same?' And the man says, 'Yes, of course, exactly the same.' And you say, 'You don't see the difference? You don't see that in one case you cause pain, which is rather grave, and in the other case you cause no pain? You don't think there's much difference between the two?' And the man says, 'I don't know what you mean. I can't see any difference. They're both resilient surfaces. I like pushing pins.' And you say, 'Supposing they push pins into you, you wouldn't like that.' And the man says, 'No, but they're not. I'm pushing pins into them.'

Supposing a man talked like this, and supposing he really thought there was nothing of any importance about causing pain – it was exactly as if they were inanimate – you would think that he was a little mad. And then you would tend to lock him up. And that is what is meant by calling people morally or even politically mad. But you would have to go a very long way before you decided that moral or political convictions made a man certifiable. You would go much less of a way in deciding that if he thought he was Julius Caesar he was certifiable – which is a mistake of fact. And the fact that this gulf has widened, and wasn't nearly so wide in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the fact that until the end of the eighteenth century value propositions and factual propositions were assimilated, and what was regarded as sanity, or what was regarded as

common sense, applied more or less equally to both – that is the achievement or the disaster, whichever you like to call it, created by the Romantic movement.

And that is what plagues us today, where we've not in any sense – or at least large numbers of us have certainly not in any sense – managed to satisfy ourselves, anyhow, or to conclude to our own satisfaction, where the frontier lies between objective rules, objective values, things beyond which, if a man goes, he is no longer human, things which are such that if a man goes beyond them, we call him inhuman or mad or no longer communicable with – where this frontier is and where it is not. And this is one of the great problems of our time and leads to a certain amount of inadequacy in coping between people of very different convictions.

However, that's a very large subject on which I now don't wish to embark. I think I've said rather too much, and gone on rather too long, and for this I apologise. I'm so sorry to have gone so fast.

Thank you very much. *[applause]*

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