



The Rise of Modern Irrationalism

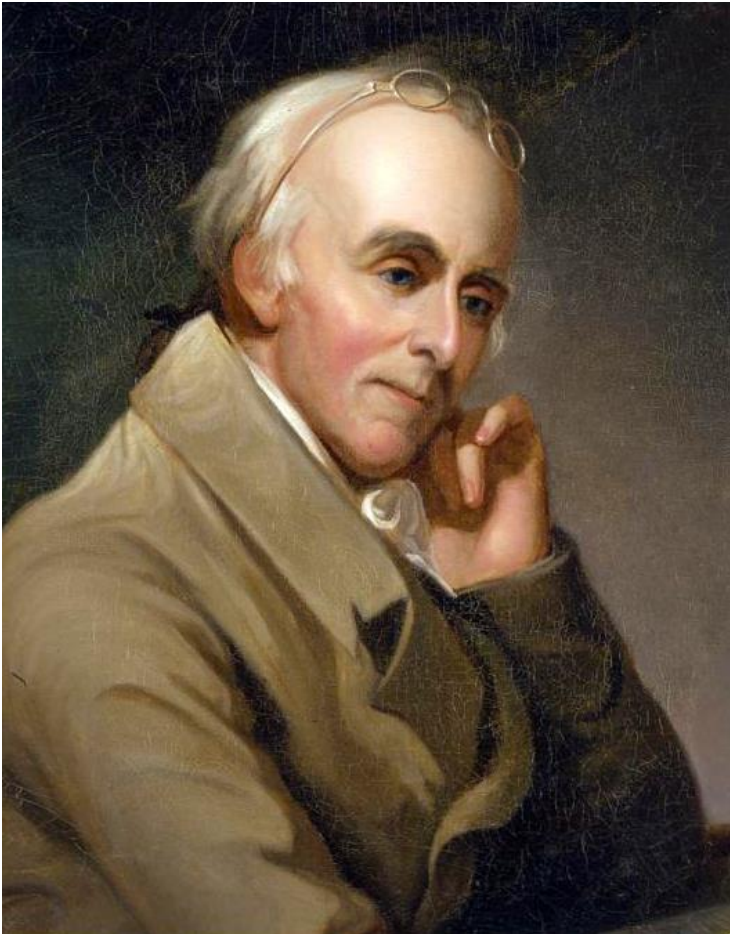
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The Rise of Modern Irrationalism

This is an edited transcript of a Benjamin Rush Lecture delivered without a prepared text to the American Psychiatric Association at 10:30 a.m. on 4 May 1971 in the Shoreham Hotel, Washington, DC. It well exemplifies Berlin's headlong style of extempore lecturing, previously displayed in the two lecture series published as *The Roots of Romanticism* in 1999 and *Freedom and Its Betrayal* in 2002.



Benjamin Rush (1746–1813) by Charles Wilson Peale, 1818

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In my preface to the former volume, I defended the publication of transcripts of this kind, unrevised by the author:

[T]here is a freshness and immediacy, an intensity and excitement in the transcript that would inevitably have been obscured, to some extent, in a carefully reworked and expanded version. There are several other unscripted lectures delivered by Berlin that survive as recordings or transcripts, and some of these can be directly compared either with published texts that derive from them, or with previously composed texts on which they are based. Such a comparison shows how the repeated revisions Berlin tended to undertake on the road to publication, for all that they enrich the intellectual content and precision of a work, can sometimes have a sobering effect on the extempore spoken word; or, conversely, it shows how a long underlying text – a ‘torso’ as Berlin called it – can acquire new life and directness when used as a source for a lecture not read from a prepared script. The lecture delivered from notes and the carefully constructed book are, one might say in pluralist terminology, incommensurable. (RR2 xx)

Berlin’s Benjamin Rush Lecture (like his Alexander S. Keller Lecture of 1963 on the related theme of **‘Romanticism, Politics and Ethics’**), is a lecture of this kind. The raw transcript, as usual, stood in considerable need of editorial attention, to eliminate inadvertent linguistic infelicities and obvious slips or errors, and this I have done my best to administer. If readers notice further flaws, I shall be glad to have them **drawn to my attention**. In the meanwhile, I hope that the text that follows achieves a judicious balance between exact fidelity to the spoken word and a natural flow of prose. It shows how Berlin’s manner of lecturing brings his subject matter to life for an audience of non-specialists. His avowed exaggeration¹ and oversimplification (not to mention straight error, sometimes inadvertent), far from being defects, are the tools of his rhetorical trade. His words here about Carlyle’s portrayal of Muhammad might be used of his own lecture:

¹ ‘[F]ew new truths have ever won their way against the resistance of established ideas save by being overstated’: ‘The Philosophical Ideas of Giambattista Vico’ (1961), TCE2 149; cf. TCE2 21, 222.

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‘This great fiery heart, seething, simmering like a furnace of thoughts’ – this, surely, is what we admire. It doesn’t occur to Carlyle to ask whether the Koran is true or false, which has presumably troubled Voltaire somewhat; it doesn’t matter. The great thing is that it’s a fiery, seething mass of life. It imposes its personality upon the world and alters life, and that’s what matters.

I have added references for direct quotations where I can, sometimes giving an exact text while leaving Berlin’s approximation uncorrected.

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THE BENJAMIN RUSH LECTURE

I'm greatly honoured by being invited by this distinguished assembly of psychiatric experts. I must confess that I'm really here under very false pretences. I know nothing – almost less than nothing, if that's possible – about your subject; less probably than an ordinary college student in this country. I can only hope that you know equally little about my subject. It is my only hope of being able to convey anything new or even interesting to you.

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THE SUBJECT I wish to talk about is the rise of modern irrationalism,² but before coming to modern days, let me say something about the notion of rationalism: not rationality so much, but rationalism – belief in reason. It's one thing to be rational; it's another thing to be consciously in favour of certain doctrines; just as irrationality is one thing, and irrationalism is another. Not everyone irrational is an irrationalist, and a good many irrationalists are rational, but that's another question.

If I may generalise in a very oversimplified fashion, let me say that the whole of the central rational Western tradition rests on three propositions: a sort of tripod whose three legs are these:

First of all, rationalism entails that all genuine questions can be answered; that true answers exist to all serious questions, because questions which can in principle not be answered at all would be regarded as faulty questions or not real questions. This is brought out very forcibly by modern positivists, but it's there in European thought since the days of Plato. The implication of this is that there is one truth and many errors; there is one true answer, all the other answers being false. This is a general part of the belief in unity, in harmony, in the possibility of a systematic body of knowledge in

² The announced title of the lecture was 'The Origins of Modern Irrationalism in the Last Two Centuries'.

which everything interconnects, with as few premisses, as few presup-positions as possible. The general human desire for unity, harmony, system is obviously very deeply embedded. It's only in modern days that the notion that variety is a good thing was born. I don't think you'll find much before the twentieth century the idea that variety or differences are valuable in themselves, and that there is something dreary and monotonous and to be condemned about uniformity – I don't think you'll find that in the ancient world. This is the product of one of the things which I intend to talk about. We all believe it now – people are always complaining about uniformity, about robots, about the necessity for individual self-expression, for variety, for colour, for light, for differences, and so on. But this is a comparatively modern notion.

The second leg of the tripod is that the methods of discovery of answers, both to factual questions and to questions of value – I mean what there should be rather than what there is – and to questions of logic – that is to say, what necessarily follows from what – that these methods are essentially either one or inter-related. And that normality in such cases is one. If a man says 'Fire never burns; it always makes things wet', this would be regarded as abnormal in the same sense in which people would think it abnormal if a man said that pain was better than pleasure, or Hume's man was prepared to destroy the universe in order to to diminish the pain in his little finger. It is normal to say that twice two is four, and Dostoevsky's underground man who finds it extremely tedious and monotonous that twice two is always four, and would like it sometimes to be seven, sometimes fourteen and a half, thinks the universe would be a better place if there weren't these fearful uniform laws of logic which constrict him like a prison. These were regarded as equal evidences of deviation from the norm, or abnormality. The second leg of the tripod is the idea of a norm.

The third proposition is that all answers, true answers, to questions, both of value and of fact, but certainly of value, must be compatible with one another. They can't conflict with one another, and at best they perhaps even entail one another. They form a

pattern. It is a simple logical truth that one truth cannot be incompatible with another. Now, if only – that is the hope – all these true answers could be obtained, and worked into a single texture, we would know what the perfect life was. The perfect life is to be described by the pattern of all true propositions which answer all true questions. We may not know them, but it must be in principle possible to construct this pattern.

There are all kinds of differences about how this truth is to be obtained, who the authority is. Some say it can only be obtained in sacred books or in revelation, or through a mysterious process of, say, self-laceration or aestheticism. Some say it can only be obtained by empirical means, by observation, by experiment. Some say the metaphysician has a direct intuition of it. Others say that any man – the democratic view – is capable of rendering an answer, if he is not corrupted by sophisticated cities or by the general oppression of an abominable culture which has twisted and maimed the souls and the bodies of men. This is what Rousseau believed, and a good many persons, as you know, believe now. You may say, for example, that this was known once upon a time in Paradise, before some dreadful events happened which destroyed this knowledge, before Adam ate the apple, before the flood, before some dreadful disaster divided mankind. Others say: On the contrary, it isn't known now, but will be known in the future; the golden age is before us, not behind us. Some say men will never know it because they will always be ignorant, or because of original sin, which prevents them from reaching this knowledge. But then if men don't know, somebody must know. The angels know, God knows – if it isn't known here it'll be known in heaven, but in principle the answer must be obtainable. Whether we can obtain it is another question.

This is an absolutely solid third leg of the rationalist tradition, because if it is denied, if you say that, for example, the answer can't be obtained, or alternatively, that some of the answers contradict or are not compatible with other answers, then the whole notion of the perfect life – a solution to human ills, the possibility of discovering how to live, what to do, disappears.

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This presupposition is very deeply embedded in Greek rationalism. Plato's doctrine is simply – as all doctrines of science have been since – you must study reality, you must know what reality consists of, you must study yourself, you must understand how you fit into the body of reality. If you understand reality and understand yourself, you will see where you fit, what you should do, in order to realise your real nature, underneath the appearances. The argument is that if you don't study reality, or if you don't study yourself, and don't understand reality and don't understand yourself, reality will get you in the end. It's a threat, a kind of cosmic utilitarianism – you must study reality, or else you'll be destroyed by it. You'll be made sad, you'll be made criminal, you'll be made vicious. That's what meant by the doctrine of virtuous knowledge – if you know what you are, and if you know what your nature craves for, you cannot seek for anything else. No man can know the truth and prefer falsehood – this is regarded as an axiom.

All these things came to be called in question in later years. This is just the foundation. The doctrine really is: Know and you shall be free, and if you don't know you cannot be free. And of course one of the implications of this, one of the great divisions it leads to stems from the question: Who knows? Is it experts? Is it true that mind rules over body, mind rules over matter, reason rules over the emotions? This leads to non-democratic elitist views: experts know, the wise know (however you define the wise). And so the hero of all rational philosophy from Plato onwards becomes the expert – the man who knows.

He is identified in different ways. Some say he's a philosopher, others say he's a priest, some say he's a scientist in the laboratory, but he's always somebody who has superior qualities of insight into knowledge, the power of experiment, the power of generalisation, or whatever it may be. Others, as I say, think that this leads to elitist consequences, and suppose that any man can develop this feeling, and this is claimed to be the view of certain persons in the nineteenth century, mainly influenced by Christianity and by Rousseau. And yet, let me say that although this was the prevalent philosophical doctrine, this is really what was started by Socrates,

who said that he was terribly disappointed that the natural philosophers of his day talked about the moon, talked about the clouds, talked about the earth, but didn't bring their reason to bear upon human life. Surely there must be truths as unbreakable, as certain, as eternal, as unalterable about what men are and what men should do as there are about trees and stones and the moon? This is the beginning of it. In spite of that, revolts have always occurred.

I don't want to dwell too long on the ancient world: my subject is the modern world. But a sense of suffocation by this kind of spick and span human order, by the notion that everything can be fitted into its proper place, that, for example, the *polis* or the city is an organisation of men each of whom contributes his particular share, plays his particular part in some harmonious or organic whole – this led to revolt at quite an early stage. Diogenes in his barrel, although he pretended to be rational, was really the first active anarchist, who wished to kick away these restraints, and felt suffocated by the excessively orderly, excessively smooth, excessively functional behaviour of the rather tightly-knit Greek city, which was altogether too enthusiastic, too hearty, too bullying for him. And this is the beginning of kicking against being fitted into a general system – a desire for the liberation of the individual from such restraints, and above all from order and from the appeal to a reason or principle that couldn't be gainsaid, on the part of, for example, political figures.

The same is true of the Stoic Zeno. The stoic Zeno wrote a *Politeia*, he wrote a book about the state, which is wholly anarchist in character. All we have are fragments, but even from these it is quite clear that he says there are no natural differences between men and women; there are no natural differences between the free and the slave. Men and women must wear the same clothes – he was a powerful supporter of women's liberation at that early stage. Everything which is natural is permitted. There is no reason why we shouldn't practice homosexuality, necrophilia or anything else that the human being may desire. All these laws which prevent you from doing this are artificial laws invented by human beings, we don't know why, for the purpose of inhibiting and restricting the

natural flow of human emotions. He was a kind of proto-Norman O. Brown on this particular issue of his day. Even though Stoicism appears to be a very restraining, severe, classical sort of philosophy, in politics and in ethics it was permissive to the highest possible degree. That is to say, provided you were reasonable, you could do anything at all. Reason meant, of course, again, understanding the nature of the universe, understanding the nature of yourself, so there was some restraint upon what you did. But he thought that forms, artificial forms, which men have imposed upon themselves were always irrational obstacles. It was a form of rationalism, but it was directed against the spick and span or tight sort of universe.

You will find, as a result of these very rationalist philosophies, Platonism, Aristotelianism, even the more rational form of Stoicism that grew up even in the ancient world, a tremendous tendency to break through this. Even in the days of Socrates, Euripides wrote *The Bacchae*, which is a tremendous paean for Romantic behaviour, for Dionysian behaviour, for breaking through the framework of civilised existence. The mystery religions, all kinds of direct forms of violent emotionalism, were the response to the overestimation of the rational possibilities of men. And this begins at a quite early stage. It begins to spread particularly in the third century BC, in the second century BC, when in spite of the highly rational philosophies, indeed scientific philosophies, which we have inherited, there were a great many mystery cults and a great deal of passionate, irrationalist behaviour. I don't mean irrational – all of us are irrational at times – savages are irrational, barbarians are irrational. Irrationalism means a conscious resistance on the part of quite sophisticated persons against what they regard as the chains imposed upon them by an over-systematised or over-schematised world. And you find this in all kinds of contexts: you find it, for example, among the Stoics and Epicureans who tried to withdraw from the life of the city; you find it among those in Palestine who tried to withdraw from the extremely legalistic and very well-organised, extremely rationally constructed life of obedience to a very elaborately interpreted system of the ancient Hebrew law.

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It usually begins with a withdrawal – withdrawal to the Jordan, withdrawal by the Epicurean and the Stoic sages into their own personalities, withdrawal from the excessive interference with themselves on the part of the organised state. And the next step after withdrawal usually tends to be an aggressive attack upon the state. The first generation withdraws, the second generation may still withdraw, but sooner or later there arises a hostility to order, either to a particular established order, and the desire to establish another order; sometimes, however, hostility to order as such, as being of the devil, as being chains laid upon the free human soul, which wishes to seek, say, union with God, or union with some other mystical source of power. This desire gets itself into a highly dynamic and aggressive state of mind, and begins to attack existing institutions. This is what happened during the more fiery moments of early Christianity, with its extreme violent attack upon the very idea of the state as such, of the civil order as such. The great saying here comes from St Augustine, who said ‘*Ama, et fac quod vis*’ – ‘Love, and do what you wish.’ Provided you love God, it doesn’t matter what you do. You can do whatever you like – it’s always going to be holy; it’s always going to be all right.

In a secular form, this is what is occurring now. Provided you are in the emotionally correct condition, provided you are pure, not contaminated by the maiming or distorting conditions of modern life, provided you are in a spiritually correct state, you can do anything you wish. There is no need for law; no need for regulations. This is exactly what the Bohemian sects of the sixteenth century believed. They practised all kinds of enormities, and in the end, of course, were destroyed by the Church. The doctrine is exactly the same. If you are in the correct emotional condition, then you must throw away these fearful frames which confine the free human spirit. This is a very common phenomenon. Who starts it? People at the edge of society – provincials, slaves, Jews, people who are offended by existing society, who are done down by it, and therefore obviously respond in an aggressive, resistant fashion. This is what happened in the ancient world, and it’s happened in the world today.

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Let me come to later days. I will pass over the Middle Ages, not so much because they offer no examples of this, as because of my profound ignorance of the subject.

Once we reach more modern days, we find the first real outbreak of this kind of attitude among the Germans. And you get it among the Germans for reasons which I don't want to speculate about too much, because if I'm ignorant of the sciences, I'm equally inexpert in history. But let me offer you this simply as a tentative explanation. There is something rather mysterious about German history in the sixteenth century. If you had passed through Europe in about 1500 from, say, the west to the east, you would have found a similar degree of civilisation existing everywhere. You would have started in western France, you would have gone through northern Italy, you would have reached southern Switzerland perhaps, you would have entered Germany. The civilised conditions prevailed everywhere. Art was flourishing. Just as there were great painters in Italy, so there were Dürer and Grünewald and Holbein in the German-speaking countries. Books were written, scholarship was blooming, Europe, in spite of the Renaissance, in spite of the destruction of the medieval unity, was still, at least intellectually, uniform and one.

If you had passed through the same territories in about 1600, you would have found that while Italy was still in a very ascendant state of creativity, and so was France, and so was England (the Elizabethan age), and so of course was Holland, and so were the Scandinavian countries, this was no longer the case in German-speaking lands. Apart from architecture, it's very difficult to think of a single great name which has contributed to general culture. There was, perhaps, Kepler, but he was an astrologer, of whom nobody took any notice while he was there. There was Althusius, who was a not very prominent political thinker. Of course there are names. If I say to you, the poetry of Moscherosch is superior to that of Gryphius, this may be true, but I wouldn't expect anyone here – I may be wrong; I may be underestimating your literary knowledge; but I would on the whole suspect that this wouldn't really ring a loud bell inside anybody's head. There were these

names, and no doubt historians of German culture have to record them, and they are known to German departments, but that is all they are known to. Germany found herself on the outskirts of European culture, and there was no true Renaissance there. And this produced an undoubted sense of outsiderdom and humiliation, which grew with the Thirty Years War, but began before it, and has obviously something to do with the rise of Lutheranism and the rise of extreme anti-rationalism under Luther, who, you must remember, did say, 'Reason is a whore, and to be avoided for that reason.'³

This is what occurred, and you will find that, as a result of this humiliation, there is a growing sense of alienation, as it's nowadays called, from the general creativity, from the general forward movement of European civilisation, and by the time you get to the late seventeenth century, by the time you get to the upsurge of the German genius again – Leibniz onwards, and the great musicians, for example, the great composers of the eighteenth century – you get this growing sense of a *ressentiment*, you get a growing sense of a resentment against Europe.

And so you get, among German pietists particularly, the reaction against excessive scholasticism on the part of certain sects inside the Protestant movement, you get a violent onslaught against the rationalist and materialist culture of the West. It's all very well, people say, in 1730, 1740 and 1750 – people like Hamann and other pietists in Germany – it's all very well to have produced this magnificent scientific body of knowledge, or this splendid material culture, the great military ascendancy of the French, the magnificent efflorescence of the arts, but the very idea that uniformity is the goal, that there are certain rules in accordance with which artists must create, certain rules discovered by reason by which states must be governed, certain rules which moral behaviour in the case of individuals must obey, certain rules in terms of which poetry must be written, in these or those kinds of

³ See *Dr Martin Luther's sämtliche Werke*, ed. Joh. Georg Plochmann and Johann Konrad Irmischer (Erlangen etc., 1826–57), xvi 142, 144, xxix 241.

patterns of syllables, in these or those kinds of rhymes, and not in any other way – these are a deep offence to the free human spirit.

All that matters in life is obtained by direct experience. When men love one another, they do not love because they deduce their duty from some general proposition about the necessity of loving. Anything that men understand – whether a man understands another human being, whether a man understands his relation to God, whether a man understands anything at all – this is a direct case of simple quasi-sensuous perception. Scientists drew generalisations; generalisations always omit the concrete and the particular, and are for that reason empty. You can have your science, you can have these great generalisations which tell you about the regular behaviour of matter, or the regular behaviour of biological organisms, or the regular behaviour of anything whatever. This is not what we're interested in. The great moments of experience are a direct confrontation of some sort: when I fall in love, when I am in misery and need a friend, when I understand what my relation is to God, whom I meet directly in the sort of way in which I can smell, see, hear.

Hume is perfectly right, say these people. Nothing that is worth anything can be demonstrated. All demonstration is of the general from the general. If I ask myself what reason I have for supposing that what I'm holding now is a sheet of paper, that I'm standing on a platform, and not, let us say, on a magic carpet, the answer is faith. I can't demonstrate it, I can't prove it. I can only deduce it from equally uncertain empirical propositions, the ultimate authority for which is direct acquaintance with a particular fact, which impinges upon me, and which I impinge upon. This is the truth, and persons who believe that I can demonstrate the existence of this or that, that I can demonstrate rules in life or in art, that I can demonstrate general propositions by which I am to be guided, that I can prove that the universe is such and such and therefore I must behave in this or that fashion, are lying and cheating.

This is the great German attack upon French rationalism. And it takes the form which it has always taken, on the part of the

wounded and the offended, against the triumphant and the successful. Just as the Stoic philosophers said in their day: 'Alexander the Great may be a marvellous king, and he may have made many conquests, but this is nothing to us. He has managed to destroy the liberty of our city; very well, then, liberty doesn't matter. He burns my house; I shall learn not to love my house. He has taken away my wife; I shall learn not to love my wife. I shall contract the vulnerable area, and remain a free man, not susceptible to these frightful rules and regulations, to this awful conditioning and bullying from outside.' This kind of attitude also develops in Germany in the eighteenth century.

The French are successful, glorious, splendid, they've won in every human sphere, but all this is perfectly worthless. They don't understand the depths of the human spirit. They don't understand the inner life. They don't understand the one art which has nothing whatever to do with external nature, which is that of music. This is the general reaction of people who are 'done down', or humiliated, or contract themselves into a little ball. This will be more familiar to you than it is to me, perhaps, and I'm now psychologising in a rash and impermissible fashion, and hope to be put right later. It appears to me that when people do that, what they really indulge in is a very large and sublime form of sour grapes, in which they say: That which I cannot obtain isn't worth obtaining. That which I have I cannot have, or does me damage, is something which I will teach myself not to want. If I can't have what I want, I shall only want what I can have. And this is a grander form of self-liberation, it's a form of achieving independence.

There is a thinker who very powerfully aided in this particular movement, which is really a form of – how shall I put it? – opting out of the active universe, in which I have to make compromises, in which I have to learn rules, in which I have to obtain a living, in which, in order not to get in other people's way, certain general propositions about what men are like, and what animals are like, and what things are like (knowledge of the general, uniform or regular behaviour of matter or of men) have to be accepted – if I wish to opt out of that universe, because it has offended me, or

because I am fixed at the wrong end of this particular stick; if I want to do that, my chief desire, of course, is to preserve my independence, my liberty. One of the great factors in this movement, surprisingly enough, is the great rationalist philosopher Immanuel Kant, who is the beginner and author of one of the greatest waves of irrationalism to spread over our world. He would have been very shocked to know that this was being said about him. He would have repudiated it with a great deal of highly justified indignation. Nevertheless, I should like to make that particular charge.

Kant believed above all, partly through his pietist upbringing, and through his extreme preoccupation with moral issues, that only acts which are worth anything at all are acts which spring from a man's true being. This is what afterwards, of course, became the heart of Romantic philosophy, as far as art is concerned: authenticity. The only thing which is worthwhile is that which I do, not that which is done for me. Never mind whether there are rules and regulations; never mind whether there are certain models for me to copy. The point is that if I copy things, I'm a slave. If I obey, I'm a slave. If I allow myself simply to do what other people have done, like a craftsman, go through the same rote again, and do what other people have done before me, I am not expressing my true nature, and I am not responsible for what I do, at least not wholly.

What does this mean? It means that only those acts are blameworthy or praiseworthy, only those acts are truly moral, for which I am responsible, and I am responsible only for that which I myself do. If the French philosophers are right, if there is a great machine of nature, or even an organism of nature, some great model like organic nature or mechanical nature which people talk about – if there is a magnificent edifice of this kind, whose laws can be discovered, in which everything moves with precision, then I am determined. If I am determined, how can I be responsible, how can I be authentic, how can my acts be my own?

The great word in Kant is 'autonomy'. Autonomy means I rule myself. Heteronomy means it rules me. What is 'it'? Nature. My body is subject to physical pressures, physiological pressures – that

can't be denied. There's no body of knowledge that can't respect this law, or try to explain it more clearly, or with a greater genius, than the sciences. My body – of course. But there must be something beside that. Because if there were nothing beside that, I would, he said, be a mere weathervane, a mere weathercock: I should simply be something acted upon by forces over which I have no control; and then why should it be assumed that my acts were mine, that they were worthy of praise and blame? I don't praise people morally for being tall or being short. I don't praise people for the acts which they cannot avoid. If they can avoid, then there must be alternatives. If there are alternatives, there must be choice. If there is choice, it can't be determined. Therefore, in that sense, I am not part of material nature. And this the French have somehow missed.

The French talk about emotions, the French talk about feelings, the French talk about what nowadays are called drives and pressures. If these things exist, they can be overcome. If my conduct is to be explained, as Helvétius or Holbach or even Diderot tried to explain it, simply in physiological terms, as the result of passions, as Jonathan Edwards in this country did (I dare say Benjamin Rush did the same) – if this is to be explained in this particular fashion, then I am simply a creature of these forces over which I have no control, which are no better than physical, or physiological, or other forces. I am chosen for, not choosing. And since he passionately believed in autonomy, his particular denunciation is reserved for any form of paternalist government.

Kant hated many other vices, no doubt, just as deeply. He doubtless hated ignorance, or idleness, or cruelty, but his harshest words are reserved, in effect, for Frederick the Great. His harshest words are reserved for a ruler who seeks to compel his subjects to improve themselves: for benevolent despots, who are paternalists, and lead human beings by a set of sticks and carrots, rewards and punishments, towards leading a better life. No doubt you can shape people like that; you can condition them. No doubt you can prevent vice, as the French maintained. Helvétius said, 'I don't care

if men be virtuous or vicious, I only care if they're intelligent.⁴ If I can establish a system of rewards and punishments, I don't mind if people do what is right for the most contemptible motives, provided they do them. I don't mind if people refrain from doing certain evil things from the basest motives, from self-advancement, or envy, or jealousy, provided they do them. They will be conditioned to do them; their children will be conditioned, and people will forget what it is to live anti-social lives. In other words it's a programme of educating people by means of legislation, by means of coercion, to stop doing all the evil things which they do only because their brains have been befuddled by a lot of cheats and impostors, a lot of kings and generals and priests, who have for too long been throwing dust in people's eyes, and who have gained power simply through fraud, violence and deception – this is the Voltairean theory, the conspiracy theory of history. We must now undo the results of this dreadful conspiracy, and make people behave in a manner in which rational philosophers know that men should behave if they are to produce a peaceful, harmonious and rational society.

For Kant, this was absolute blasphemy. It meant that you deprived men of liberty in order to make them happy, but to deprive a man of liberty was to deprive him, of course, of his humanity. Hence this tremendous emphasis on dehumanisation, the degradation of this kind of behaviour. The whole of the sermon against exploitation of human beings derives from this position. If you say, 'Why shouldn't one human being exploit another? Why shouldn't he use him as a means?' – well, it may not be very nice for the man who is exploited, but there are worse things, such as being wounded, or killed. For Kant this is the degradation of the human spirit: a man's first right is to determine himself in any direction. A man must be free to choose evil, if he's

⁴ 'Peu importe que les hommes soient vicieux; c'en est assez s'ils sont éclairés.' *De l'homme* (London [sc. The Hague], 1773) 9. 6. 'It is of little consequence that men be vicious; it is enough that they be intelligent.' *A Treatise on Man* [...], trans W. Hooper (London, 1777), ii 301.

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to be a man at all. It's better if he doesn't. But if a man cannot choose evil, neither can he choose good, and then he's not a chooser at all, and he's not a man. And this led to a new attitude towards nature.

For Kant, nature can't be this, because all that nature seeks to do is to enslave you, nature wants to make you like a table, like a rock, like a cow, something which obeys laws which it can't help – and ultimately nature kills you. The general purpose of nature is to reduce you to uniformity of some kind – to dust. Man must assert himself in a free manner. This is the essence of what it is to have a soul, and what it is to be a man, and therefore what it is to be autonomous and self-directed. And therefore, nature for Kant is at best neutral stuff upon which we impose our creative natures; at worst it's an enemy, to be fought by every possible means, to be moulded, and to be resisted. And this becomes a permanent note in German metaphysics.

Take, for example, Schiller, who followed Kant. He was not only a great playwright, but a philosopher of extreme competence. Let me give you just one example of this new attitude, and you will see where irrationalism has some of its roots. (Before I come to Schiller, let me tell you that even in France, and even among the *philosophes*, even among these most rational and most scientifically minded of men, there was a note of that. In Diderot, for example, who was a highly ambivalent thinker, man is simply a natural creature struggling with an artificial one. There is a cave inside man in which natural man is always at deadly grips with the artificial man imposed upon him by evil society. He's just like Rousseau in that sense. And he says the great thing is to break through this awful, artificial framework. We've heard a great deal about this in our day. And if you could only break through and become natural, then man will be free and he will follow his own true nature.)

Schiller says that criminals, for example, are not to be judged in the way in which the eighteenth-century society judges them. Criminals are very close to artists, because they have the same sort of natures, they have much bigger imaginations, a greater sense of power, and far greater creativity. Criminals are a form of the

protest of the natural man against the cribbing and confining profiteers of tidy, spick and span, civilised society. And therefore there is something common to all revolté spirits. Genius essentially is quite different from wit; it's quite different from pleasing society, or from living by its canons. Genius, he says, is a wild, untameable bird, which flies only at night and rends the darkness and the silence by its discordant cries. The first mark of genius is that it makes people uneasy. The first mark of great art is that it makes people uneasy. And criminals are not too far away from that.

For Hamann, for example, criminals are essentially irregulars. Tramps, criminals, outcasts, these people are closer to God than ordinary men, because they have broken through the fearful crust which has been imposed upon them by a lot of atheistical, unimaginative and law-abiding, but essentially bourgeois, Philistine persons.

Let me give you examples in Schiller. He discusses the play *Medea*. I don't think the *Medea* he talks about is Euripides' *Medea*; it's probably Corneille's *Medée*, but no matter. I assume that everyone here probably knows the story of *Medea*, but to put it very briefly, in case there may be one or two who don't: The story of *Medea* is that she's the daughter of the king of Colchis. Jason goes to get the Golden Fleece in Colchis, which is in southern Crimea. *Medea*, the king's daughter, helps him to get it. He then takes her away, abducts her more or less; he marries her, he lives with her; he abandons her. She is displeased by being abandoned, and in order to avenge herself upon her husband, proceeds to kill their children. In some stories she kills them by strangling them; in other stories by boiling them alive. Whichever it is that she does, Schiller doesn't approve. Nevertheless, he says that *Medea* is a tragedy not because of *Medea*'s bad behaviour, because if this bad behaviour had been stimulated by passion, or by emotion, then she would simply be behaving like an object in nature. It would be disgusting, it would be sad, it would be destructive, but it would be no worse, presumably, than a flood which kills people, or a stone which falls on somebody's head. It would be like Iago in Shakespeare, who was a man entirely driven by his lusts, or driven

by his passion, by his hatred, who is simply a slave to his passions, in a literal sense, and is therefore isn't a tragic figure at all. He's just like an animal which simply wants to rip Othello to pieces.

But Medea does something much more than that: Medea rises above instinct. She rises above her maternal feelings, and resists them; she rises against the conventional society of her time and defies it. Medea is a much bigger figure in the play, because she breasts the tide, she resists the natural forces bearing upon her, whether social or psychophysical; and because she resists, she's human, and because she resists, she's heroic. Heroism always consists in violent self-assertion; it may take beastly or vicious forms, as in the case of Medea, or a benevolent form, but resistance is of the essence of the free human being. And therefore, here is Medea – she may be a wicked, evil woman, but she's at least a tragic queen, whereas poor old Jason, who simply leaves her for another woman, is a perfectly ordinary, common, conventional garden variety character floating down the tide of ordinary, bourgeois existence, and of no possible interest to anyone. And therefore there is a contrast between the tame Jason, who's in no sense a tragic figure, who's just 'inauthentic', as the existentialists say, just accepts the values of his society, doesn't think very much about it, is just carried along the stream of ordinary desire and temptation, as against this monster, Medea, who asserts herself against this, and in this way, proves her liberty. Although it's misused, it is liberty.

Fichte, who followed Schiller, developed this to a very violent extent. His whole doctrine consisted of the fact that liberty was of the essence of human beings, and of course it's a double-edged weapon. It creates disaster as well as saving men. Nations fight each other, he says, savages fight each other, because they are free to do so, but nations who are civilised, and technologically equipped, also do so. Liberty is by no means a necessary upshot of civilisation. Civilisation does not save men from destructive violence. Liberty allows them to do so. Nevertheless, if a man were invited to barter away his liberty for happiness, he would surely not do so. Fichte is perhaps the first person to say that if happiness were the human goal, liberty would be the gravest possible

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nuisance, and if you could possibly get rid of it, if you could possibly go through an operation or take a pill which would render you no longer capable of exercising your choices, this would probably be the best guarantee of a smooth, frictionless, undiscontented life that you could possibly have.

Nevertheless, if people were asked to choose this, they would be very unlikely to do so. Why not? Because they know that conscience and liberty are what makes them human; and the rest would dehumanise them. He goes on to say – and this is the great break – that previously men believed that the values which they followed were discovered somehow, were discovered by some measurable method, but were objective, universal, the same for all men everywhere – natural law. They were just as discoverable as facts. But this is not true, he says. Values do not determine me; I determine them. Values do not choose me: I choose them. The world is as I make it to be. The world of the rich is different from the world of the poor, because I cut it differently. The world of the brave is different from the world of the cowardly. The kind of philosophy I have depends upon the way in which I look upon the world. The world is not a flat, passive entity, as Locke conceived it to be; or rather man is not a flat, passive bucket into which nature simply pours her data, or simply a recipient of certain impressions from without. Man is an active being, who shapes his world in accordance with his temperament, and shapes it freely. The world, he said in a rather extravagant way, is a poem dreamt up in my inner life.⁵ This is a tremendous move, and a move of a rather sinister kind. It's an attempt to see social life, and to see individual life, on the analogy of aesthetics or art.

In the nineteenth century, it was the Russian revolutionary Herzen who said: Where is the dance before we dance it? Where is the picture before we've painted it?⁶ In the eighteenth century, it

⁵ This is in fact a version of a remark about Fichte's views by Josiah Royce: 'The world is the poem [...] dreamed out by the inner life.' *The Spirit of Modern Philosophy* (Boston and New York, 1892), 162.

⁶ For this apparent misquotation from Herzen see RT2 xiv/2.

was there. If you'd listened to Joshua Reynolds's lectures, you would find that there were certain ideal types laid up in a Platonic heaven which the artist was somehow trying to see with a non-empirical eye, and then to copy on to canvas or into marble. Or, even if you didn't believe that, you believed there were certain rules, certain laws – harmony, counterpoint, perspective in various arts – which were objective, which were given, which were just as given as any of the laws of physics or of chemistry. If you read the account by Montesquieu, who's so very relativistic, of visiting at the galleries of Europe, you will find that he knows which pictures are good, which pictures are bad, by mechanically applying objective rules of whose validity he hasn't the faintest doubt. This is an attitude which was broken at about this stage, whereby you say, 'Where is the picture before I painted it?' – answer, 'Nowhere.' Before I painted it, it was not there. I created it out of nothing. The material may be there, but what I create is up to me. And therefore the notion of man as a creator, the notion of man as a producer, is born in protest against the spick and span French world in which everything can be found in its place, in which conduct can be explained in terms of laws which determine him to be as he is. It's a violent, anti-deterministic outbreak, and of course it takes more and more savage forms.

In the case of Fichte, for example, it takes the form of identifying as real men – which he regarded the Germans as being – those men who are caught up in the creative continuum of life, men who are inspired, men who understand that life is material to be shaped by imposing our own free patterns upon it. Hence the sacredness of labour, for example. The sacredness of labour, or the holiness of work, derives from the fact that it's a creative instinct of man which then imposes itself, sets its seal upon reality. This is the origin of all the socialist doctrines about the right to work, which is a sacred right, and upon the importance of labour, which is a sacred function of man. If man is stopped from labouring, his human nature is maimed and destroyed. There is a large element of Romanticism in Marx which derives from this source, which is not perhaps often enough noticed, and in Hegel. And similarly, this

spreads outwards – the notion that the universe is an ordered whole which science can tell us about is something which is odious to the German Romantics.

Take the case of Carlyle, which is a very good example of what I mean. Carlyle was in effect the kind of German thinker who had no ancestry in England, and no progeny either: a unique figure, who was both influenced by, and influenced, mainly, central Europeans and Germans. Carlyle is writing about Muhammad in *Heroes and Hero-Worship*. Voltaire wrote a play about Muhammad. The contrast is instructive. In Voltaire Muhammad is simply an analogue, he's really a disguised version of the Roman Church, which he wished to attack. Muhammad is a bigoted, fanatical, irrational tyrant who crushes reason and reduces men to irrational slavery in order to secure power. He is a fraudulent and violent conspirator who appeals to the lowest instincts of human nature. This is a most wicked attack.

Let me read you what Carlyle says: 'A fiery mass of Life, cast up from the great bosom of Nature herself. To *kindle* the world.' And again, 'This great fiery heart, seething, simmering like a furnace of thoughts'⁷ – this, surely, is what we admire. It doesn't occur to Carlyle to ask whether the Koran is true or false, which has presumably troubled Voltaire somewhat; it doesn't matter. The great thing is that it's a fiery, seething mass of life. It imposes its personality upon the world and alters life, and that's what matters. What matters is dynamic action. What matters is freedom on the part of this great man, who managed to subjugate a lot of other people because he knew what he was doing, and because he imposed his personality in a fiery manner upon them. 'Difficulty, abnegation, martyrdom, death are the *allurements* that act on the heart of man':⁸ there is nothing which the eighteenth century could have believed in less.

⁷ Thomas Carlyle, 'The Hero as Prophet': *On Heroes, Hero-Worship, & the Heroic in History* (London, 1841), 75, 108.

⁸ *ibid.* 114.

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After the failure of the French Revolution, which was the greatest revolution ever undertaken in the name of reason, in the name of system, in the name of clear, universal principles which all men not corrupted by society could understand; after the relative failure of the French Revolution, which on the contrary brought to the attention the role of great men, of leaders, of mobs, of violence, of chance, and shook this faith in the possibility of reason as a constructor of a better life; after the French Revolution, black thinkers, reactionary thinkers like Maistre, start pointing out that what men really want is not a happy life, which is constructed by people sharing labour. He says: Eighteenth-century philosophers tell us that the purpose of life is mutual aid or cooperation in the building of a satisfactory life for all. This simply isn't so, he says. What people really want is to immolate themselves on some common altar. It doesn't matter what altar: the important thing is the immolation.

What do people fight against? When Peter the Great wanted to shave the beards of the boyars there was a revolt; when the calendar was changed in the eighteenth century people thought they were losing a great many days out of their lives, and there was a revolt; but if you have a large number of people who are sent to fight a war, the purpose of which they don't understand, innocent, good people against people equally innocent and good, who also don't understand why they're fighting, very few revolts occur in the field. Why is this? Because what people want is a great act of loyal, mutual self-destruction. Earth cries for blood; there is a great deal of aggressive instinct in man which must be given a vent.

Rationalism indeed, he says. Take, for example, rational forms of human existence. Nothing is more irrational than a monarchy. Even if one king is good, his children, or grandchildren, or great-grandchildren are not likely to be wise or good or useful. Nevertheless, there were sixty-four kings of France, some good, some bad, but the monarchy has lasted. Whereas the French Republic – how long has that lasted in its day? True, there was a glorious Athenian republic, but how long did that last? Marriage is the most irrational of all institutions. Why should I wish to live

with the same woman for the rest of my life because she pleases me in some degree for a week or a month? Nevertheless, marriage has lasted for this long, whereas free love invariably leads to confusion and disorder. The most rational form of life is the Polish Diet, whereby the king is elected, and the people have a free veto upon legislation, which gives at least the nobility complete freedom of action, with the result that the Polish constitution, Polish political life, is the most disorderly, chaotic and destructive form of life known to mankind so far. And so on. And this is a great sermon against the possibility of relying upon rational weapons which are very thin crusts upon which human beings can't rely.

True, he went too far, he was much too violent, he was a reactionary and so forth. Nevertheless, this was the age and this was the time when he pointed out the blacker aspects of human life, which doubtless are familiar to everyone here, but perhaps have not been given sufficient notice in the smoother works of the Enlightenment. He's rather interesting on language too. He says language is the most irrational of all things; it encapsulates every prejudice, every superstition, every nuance, every emotion – not at all rational – which the tribe has felt. Of course in the eighteenth century there are people who say: Get rid of French, get rid of English, use Latin or some cosmopolitan language that everybody understands. But that will simply get rid of the whole accumulated emotional patina, of the whole accumulated memories of the race, in virtue of which, half consciously, we live. It's a Burkean sermon. He says, how does language arise? M. Condillac, who can answer everything, can answer that too. He says it's done by division of labour. So, he says, we are meant to understand that the first generation of men said BA, and the second generation said BE. The Assyrians invented the nominative, and the Medes invented the genitive: this is how it works. And he goes on to say: M. Rousseau says: Why is man, who is born free, everywhere in chains?⁹ It is as

⁹ This question and the next are statements in the original texts. 'Rousseau [...] commence son Contrat social par cette maxime retentissante: *L'homme est né*

if you were to ask: Why do sheep, who are born carnivorous, nevertheless everywhere nibble grass?¹⁰ I merely quote the violent eruptions of the Romantic spirit of this particular time.

The heart of Romanticism is, for example, among the German dramatists of the time, who perhaps affected opinion more than formal philosophers did. If you look, for example, at the origins of the theatre of the absurd (which is one of the great examples of modern irrationalism), if you look at the plays of the German dramatist Tieck, in 1804,¹¹ quite an early date, you will find that everything is done to destroy the notion that reality is an organised system which a reasonable researcher can get right.

There are scenes of the following kind.¹² Let's say it's a fairy story, and a prince comes on the stage and talks to the king. The king says, 'You come from far away; how do you come to talk our language so well?' And the prince says, 'Hush', and the king says, 'Why are you shushing me?' And the prince says, 'Because if you go on like this, they may demand an interpreter, which this theatre

libre, et partout il est dans les fers.' Joseph de Maistre, *Du Pape*, book 3, chapter 2, 'Liberte civile des hommes', opening sentence.

¹⁰ This riposte was in fact written by Émile Faguet in 'Joseph de Maistre', *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle*, 1st series (Paris, 1891), p. 41: 'Dire: les moutons sont nés carnivores, et partout ils mangent de l'herbe, serait aussi juste.'

¹¹ Tieck's first absurdist play, *Der gestiefelte Kater* [*Puss in Boots*], appeared in 1797. Why 1804?

¹² The ostensible quotations in this account of Tieck's plays, which may derive, at least in part, from George Brandes, *Main Currents in Nineteenth Century Literature*, vol. 2, *The Romantic School in Germany* (1873), English translation (London, 1902), 153–5 (see illustrations on next page), seem to be a mixture of quotation and sympathetic invention. For *Puss in Boots* see *Der gestiefelte Kater* (1797), act 1, scene 2: Ludwig Tieck, *Schriften*, ed. Hans Peter Balme and others (Frankfurt am Main, 1985–), vol. 6, *Phantasmus*, ed. Manfred Frank, 509.34 to 510.26. In the bilingual version of the play by Gerald Gillespie (Austin, 1974) this passage is at 62–3. The later parts of IB's version (from 'Is this a play [...]?') don't seem to correspond to any specific passage in the play. The play in which the clown Scaramouche ('Skaramuz' in German) is a character is *Die verkehrte Welt* [*The Topsy-Turvy World*] (1798). For the passages referred to here see act 2, scene 3 (ibid. 588.2–18); again, the distance between Tieck's text and IB's 'quotations' increases as the paragraph proceeds. Cf. RR2 134, 195–6.

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hasn't got'. And then somebody in the audience gets up and says, 'This is absolutely monstrous. Is this a play or is this reality? You can't have confusion between the arts and reality. Will you kindly stop this play at once – this won't do.' And then somebody in the audience gets up and says, 'Will you kindly sit down. Nobody knows if these people were planted there by the dramatist, or are real members of the audience', and there is complete chaos.

So Tieck mocks ironically at things which are usually ignored in order not to disturb the illusion. In *Puss in Boots* the King says to Prince Nathaniel: "But do tell me; how is it that you who live so far away can speak our language so fluently?" Nathaniel: "Hush!" The King: "What?" Nathaniel: "Hush, hush! For any sake be quiet, or the audience too will be finding out how unnatural it is." And, sure enough, one of the spectators presently remarks: "Why in the world can't the prince talk a foreign language and have it translated by his interpreter? What utter nonsense it all is!" This last speech is of course

The passages in Brandes (see note 10) which IB may have used (153–4; 154–5)

A still more extraordinary state of matters prevails in *Die Verkehrte Welt* ("The Topsy-turvy World"). As Scaramouch is riding through the forest on his donkey, a thunderstorm suddenly comes on. One naturally expects him to take shelter. Not at all. "Where the deuce does this storm come from?" he cries; "there's not a word about it in my part. What absurd nonsense! My donkey and I are getting soaked. Machinist! machinist! hi! in the devil's name stop it!" The machinist enters and excuses himself, explains that the audience had expressed a desire for stage-thunder, and that he had consequently met their wishes.

This is intended to produce a dreamlike confusion between reality and appearance, between reality and the stuff on the stage, which somehow is supposed to convey that, beneath the smooth

rationality of what scientists investigate, there is absolute hurly-burly, there is a topsy-turvy world which cannot be examined in this way.

There is another play in which there is a clown riding on a donkey, and it is thundering. The clown says, 'What, thunder? In a serious play? In a grave play – in a good solid play? Surely you can't have thunder in a tragedy?' And he calls to the engineer, and says, 'Will you kindly stop this thunder?' And the engineer says, 'Oh, well, the audience likes thunder, and there's a very good thunder-making machine in this theatre, and they always want it used.' And then again, someone gets up in the audience and says, 'Will you kindly stop this dialogue? Can't the play go on?', and so on.

And then there are the stories by E. T. A. Hoffman, of *The Tales of Hoffmann*. You may take them as being harmless stories of a childish imagination, though of course Hoffmann was in fact a little insane. But the stories in Hoffmann¹³ often take the form of, say, dutiful brass knockers who suddenly turn into old ladies; old ladies then turn into brass knockers; respectable councillors enter glasses of brandy and evaporate into the universe, fly around, and then re-accumulate themselves into the brandy glass and into their dressing-gowns. These rather violent transformations of brass knockers into women, or women into capital letters in manuscripts, or all kinds of violent transformations of much more than an ordinary pantomime kind, are intended to convey a picture of a chaotic world in which anything might become anything, and to discredit the idea that at the heart of things there is something rational, that there is an order which can be discovered.

And gradually this enters into politics as well. It enters into Romantic politics. As a result of this, new virtues are conceived of in the world which weren't conceived before. For example, sincerity. I may stand liable to correction – I hope somebody may correct me – but it appears to me that nobody ever praised sincerity before about 1750, at all. Or martyrdom, except for the truth. The point is this: the idea that sincerity is a virtue as such, never mind

¹³ IB's examples are from *The Golden Pot* (1814, revised 1819).

what it's sincerity about, is something comparatively new, because of the disappearance of the second leg of the tripod, according to which true answers can be obtained to all true questions. If you take, for example, the seventeenth century, you have Catholics and Protestants. Of course martyrdom is important if it's for the truth, because human souls depend for their salvation upon it. Therefore, if I am a Catholic, I wish to exterminate Protestants, because they mislead people and ruin them, then ruin themselves, and to drive them into Hell and perdition. The Protestants wish to do the same to me, a Catholic. What you don't get is a Catholic or a Protestant saying, in 1530 or 1550, 'True, this man is wicked, and what he believes is wicked, and what he believes is monstrous, filthy nonsense, and he drives souls away from God and into the most terrible Hell. But one has to hand it to him. He is very sincere, he is a man of integrity, he wants to lay down his life for these things, and this after all is a magnificent virtue, and one has to bow to something so magnificent in the world.' Nobody, you will find, said that in 1750. And they didn't say that – on the contrary – because if you really believed in the objective truth, and the importance of the objective truth, be it science, be it religion – it doesn't matter which – if you really believed in this truth, then anyone who operated against it, the more sincere they were, the more fanatical they were, the more dangerous they were, the more mad they were. You didn't need to spit on them. A Christian knight didn't spit on his Muslim enemy when he killed him, if he was a brave man. But he didn't say, 'I wish I had half his dignity; I wish I had half his faith.' Far from it: if you believe what is nonsense, it's pitiful, it's ridiculous, it's absurd; it's not respectable. It's like a man who says, 'The grass is everywhere red.' And you say about the man, 'You know he doesn't say it for money, he doesn't say it to annoy you, he doesn't say it for any specific reason; he says it because he believes it, and he is prepared to lay down his life for it.' Well, if you are at all kindly disposed, you don't insult him, but neither do you respect him. In the field of morality, in the field of values, exactly the same obtained, until the period of which I speak.

But during the the early nineteenth century, this profoundly changed. There you have the real Romantic belief: If I believe something, if you believe something, and these things are not compatible (because, of course, these aren't objective true answers to problems; these are inventions, these are creations; the great thing is that values are not discovered, values are made; they are created by my free spirit – the analogy is to art) – if I believe this, and I believe it because it's true to me, because it's the expression of my free, ebullient nature, and you believe the opposite, then we must fight. I can kill you; you can kill me. Perhaps we shall kill each other. Any of these courses is clearly preferable to the one disgraceful course, which is compromise. Compromise means that we lack integrity, that we knuckle under to the contemptible love for living, for survival, for comfort, for prosperity, perhaps even for education. These are as nothing compared to principle. And the idea that principles are worth dying for no matter what, that the important thing is to be ready to die – it matters far less what you're dying for – this really is new. Of course martyrdom was always respected, provided it was martyrdom for the truth. But martyrdom for falsehood – no.

By the nineteenth century, the notion of truth evaporates to a large extent from the content of people's ideals. Take the word 'realist'. Usually, when a man says, 'I'm afraid I'm rather a realist', he means he's about to tell a lie, or do something exceedingly shabby. This rather curious use of the word 'real', this rather pejorative sense of the word 'reality', is the gift to us of the movement of which I speak, which regarded reality as malleable, not something fixed. If you said you were a realist, you meant you agreed to defy principle, you agreed to defy your inner liberty. You were not going to act as an authentic person, but knuckle under to something rather disgraceful. And this is brand new.

So, you get a new generation which believes in sincerity, integrity, not selling out; defiance, martyrdom, as such; minorities are better than majorities, failure is better than success (which is a vulgar thing, entailing compromise). And this is no doubt what Romantic students in Germany believed around 1810 or 1815, as

opposed to the more reasonable ones elsewhere. This is the beginning of the whole process. Sometimes it takes noble forms, and sometimes it takes terrible forms.

The hero of the nineteenth century is Beethoven, not because he's ignorant, not because he's disagreeable, not because he's extremely unattractive, but because he doesn't betray his inner light. It's a fortunate thing that he happened to be a genius, and his music is pleasing, but even if it weren't it would still be all right. In Balzac, there's the character Frenhofer, a mad painter who covers the canvas with an absolute chaos of colours and lines which mean nothing at all. Still, he is a more respectable person than someone who makes picture postcards in the market, because at least he serves the inner fire within. True, the inner fire, unfortunately, has taken a deranged form. But better be deranged and full of integrity than sane and venal. And this is the great nineteenth-century Romantic irrational self. And from this, it marches forward.

It takes a political and much more sinister form: Napoleon. Napoleon is admired by the irrationalists of whom I speak, not because of the *Code Napoléon*, which is a highly rational document, and reorganised the chaos of the Middle Ages; not for conquering countries, because that's a technological victory, done by studying the art of war, which is done by reason; but because he's a great moulder of men. He's an artist in statecraft, and his materials are human beings. You are either creative or you are uncreative. If you are a true, authentic being, then you create like Napoleon, and you mould new entities out of human material. Artists, painters do it with paints; composers do it with sounds; Napoleon does it with human flesh. True, it may not be very nice for the people who are moulded, but these people will never rise to such heights by their own efforts, because they are Philistines, because they are second-rate, because they are no good. And therefore their only hope of something marvellous is to be raised to a sublime height by someone like Napoleon. This may be tormenting, this may have ended their lives, this may be terrible torture, but still, they are raised to an ecstatic height, and ought to bless the world in which

they are worthy of such noble suffering for the sake of a splendid new form of existence.

You can see that from this stems the path to leadership, to Fascism, to national socialism, to the whole syndrome of saying reason is tame, reason flattens things out, reason is monotonous, reason kills the human soul; the only thing which is worth while is the great artist, with his boiling, seething Carlylian heart, which creates new shapes in the world. Never mind the fact that it crushes human beings, or deprives other people of their liberty, or inflicts the most appalling pain upon them – the path from here is fairly straight. One must never blame predecessors for the perversions of their doctrines among their successors; nevertheless there is such a thing as historic continuity.

You will find exactly the same thing repeated in a great many of the thoughts of the nineteenth century. I needn't mention the name of Nietzsche to you, in whom this becomes very active. There are three moralities in Nietzsche. The superior morality of the heroic man is the morality of a man who rises above the herd, and constructs his own vision. He doesn't copy it from something else. Above all, the warning in Nietzsche is always against submission to something given, to something dead, to something which the sciences produce.

Blake is perhaps the greatest poet who ever celebrated this. 'Art is the Tree of Life [hello my what it cience is the Tree of Death'.¹⁴ 'A Robin Red breast in a Cage / Puts all Heaven in a Rage'.¹⁵ What is the cage? It is not a cage in the way you might think: this is not literal. It isn't what robin redbreast is thinking, or an actual cage. The cage is the great scientific construction of which Newton and Locke are the authors: a they are the greatest villains that have ever destroyed the life of mankind. For Blake, Newton is the arch-devil, and Locke a second arch-devil, because they have flattened out: they have constructed a great cage for human beings in which the

¹⁴ 'Laocoon', aphorisms 17, 19: *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford, 1978), vol. 1, 665, 666.

¹⁵ 'Auguries of Innocence', line 5: *ibid.*, vol. 2, 1312.

free spirit can no longer roam. There's a passage in which he says they have 'form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them / The eternal laws of God.'¹⁶ Nothing is more awful than that. And for Blake, the roaming of the free spirit is all: he's perhaps the first poet who ever celebrated the notion that all science somehow leads to death. 'We murder to dissect', said Wordsworth,¹⁷ and meant roughly the same thing. I won't multiply instances.

After Nietzsche, you find this in all kinds of other forms. You find it, for example, in the socialist Sorel, who, above all, warned the socialist movement against excessive addiction to a lot of theoretical exposition by a lot of grey academics who don't understand the nature of life, and kill the initial creative impulse of socialism, which is the creation of a new, active, dynamic working man whom they're killing beneath a great mountain of theory, a great mountain of books. Therefore parties mustn't exist. Parties mean people whose opinions agree with each other. But opinions are secondary things: opinions are things which are gained by the use of reason. The only way in which you can really fight is by close communion with your fellow workers, with whom you have an emotional bond of belonging, with whom you feel a sense of family kinship. And it's only when you get together with people like that that the initial impulse to destroy the cage in which you're imprisoned can occur. Whereas if you lean on reason, if you lean on argument, others may be able to out-argue you. 'Anything man makes, man can mar,' Rousseau said long ago,¹⁸ and Sorel repeats it. If you really believe in the construction of reason, some clever fellow will come and undo it. The only thing which cannot be destroyed is something which defies reason, something that is beyond reason, something of which you say in advance that reason cannot touch it: dark forces of a frightening kind which drive us

¹⁶ *The First Book of Urizen*, plate 28, lines 4–7: *ibid.*, vol. 1, 282.

¹⁷ 'The Tables Turned' (1798), line 28.

¹⁸ 'Tout ce qu'ont fait les hommes, les hommes peuvent le détruire': *Émile*, book 3: J. J. Rousseau, *Émile, ou de l'éducation* ('Francfort', 1762), vol. 2, 60. At RR2 145, IB attributes the remark to Joseph de Maistre. I have not found an equivalent remark in Maistre or in Sorel. H.H.

forward, which are too strong for reason ever to touch. This is a kind of Bacchanalia or Saturnalia of unreason, which breaks forth in the nineteenth century, although it has roots in the eighteenth.

People sometimes think of the eighteenth century as a smooth, glassy, classical century, but anyone who studies it at all closely, in depth, will find that by the 1770s a lot of chiromancers and necromancers, and all kinds of persons with stigmata, wandered about. The royal heads of Europe and the great aristocracies turned tables, believed in the visitations of the dead, were engaged in all kinds of appalling exercises of the most violent and extraordinary kind. This was very widespread, more so in Germany than in France, but pretty widespread in all the Scandinavian countries, and France as well, and northern Italy. A lot of magicians, mesmerists and so forth appeared, who engaged some of the most intelligent and interesting people, and this was nothing but an emotional reaction against what was obviously regarded as a dry and dehydrating atmosphere of excessive rationalisation of life. Above all, there must be no bending and no binding of human beings: ‘Ama et fac quod vis’¹⁹ – ‘Love and do what you wish to do.’

Let me draw to an end. You can see that this kind of attitude is going to put greater stress on motive than it is on consequence. Consequences are not in our power: motives are. It’s going to put greater stress on sincerity, on the heart, on purity, on integrity, than on efficiency, on the improvement of human life, on competence and, above all, on truth. The notion of truth becomes dissipated. In moral matters, in aesthetic matters, in matters of value, although it still persists in a humble way, it isn’t what it is in theories about the external world.

The result is that we, who are born after all these ages, are divided. The present situation is paradoxical. There is a kind of flux and reflux, there’s always a kind of claustrophobia, followed by agoraphobia, followed by claustrophobia, in human affairs of this

¹⁹ A common misquotation of St Augustine’s ‘Dilige et quod vis fac’, *In Epistolam Joannis ad Parthos Tractatus Decem* (AD 413), tractatus 7, § 8.

type. Take the middle of the nineteenth century. Some people think that the Russian nihilists are a source of modern irrationalism. This is quite false. The great progressive movements of the nineteenth century – socialism, Communism, anarchism – are highly rational movements, or, rather, rationalist movements. If you ask yourself, ‘What did the great revolutionists of the nineteenth century want?’, they wanted self-understanding. They wanted to understand nature, and to understand ourselves, exactly as Plato did, only their methods differed. They thought that men were as they were because of mistakes made in the past, ‘interested error’,²⁰ as the eighteenth century called it, as a result of which wicked men oppressed others – or perhaps not through their own fault, but through ignorance or through idols. They believed that we were at the mercy of nature, and of men’s irrationalist doctrines, or of men’s destructive practices.

Once we understood – say by studying Hegel, or Marx, or Spencer – what nature was really like, and what psychology was like, and what sociology was like, and what psychopathology was like, we would be able to dominate nature, and not be at her mercy. We would be able to organise a harmonious and just order among men, and not be dependent upon whim, upon fantasies, upon irrational prejudice, upon superstition, upon the whole accumulation of error, the whole accumulation of exploitation, interested error, which certain classes (if you believe in the class

²⁰ It seems most likely that IB took this phrase from an excessively free passage in a translation of Holbach’s *Système de la nature*. In part 1, chapter 1, ‘De la nature’, Holbach writes: ‘recourons a nos sens, que l’on nous a fausement fait regarder comme suspects’. In his 1820 translation, Samuel Wilkinson renders this ‘let us recover our senses, which interested error has taught us to suspect’. H. D. Robinson borrows Wilkinson’s invention in his 1868 version: ‘let us fall back on our senses, which error, interested error, has taught us to suspect’. However creative this Englishing may be, the sentiment is entirely characteristic of Holbach, who writes, for example, of ‘erreurs utiles’ in the same work, part 2, chapter 12, and of ‘hommes fortement interessés a l’erreur’ in *Le Bon Sens*, § 82. H.H.

theory) had an interest in promoting and maintaining. This was the progressive view of the nineteenth century.

Therefore the hope was always in science: human science, social science, the right kind of science; Marxist science rather than Newtonian science, perhaps, or Marxist science rather than liberal economics, or anarchist views as opposed to coercive views. But they all appealed to discoverable facts about human nature. Kropotkin like Marx, Marx like Spencer, Spencer like any of these thinkers of the nineteenth century, were always appealing to observation, to scientific knowledge, to truth which was open, objective, public, and could be checked by any man. Not to something esoteric which was confined to a few men, or to the dark forces within us.

If you read Turgenev's *Fathers and Children*, you will find that the violent nihilist Bazarov is simply a man who believes that dissecting frogs is more important than reading Pushkin. It's more important because it gives you the truth, whereas Pushkin is a mass of idle fantasies. Therefore his whole doctrine is that we want to get rid of this whole horrible world of aesthetics, of good manners, of accumulated tradition, of intuition, of all of these things, of class differences and so on, on which we depend. Science will liberate us. Rational men will govern other rational men, and in this way justice and happiness will be introduced into the world. He is the extremest form of destruction of the aesthetic and religious and metaphysical culture of the nineteenth century.

You may say that these men have won. There isn't a corporation in the world now, in America or anywhere else, that doesn't accept all this. The entire technological world is built upon it. It is built upon these very insights, these very *dogmata*, these very preachings of the most advanced left-wing thinkers of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps this is not true of Sorel, who was regarded by Lenin as a martyr (quite rightly, from his point of view). But if you ask what Lenin believed, what Marx believed, what Trotsky believed, what Comte believed, what French positivists or Communists believed, this is common ground: the elimination of the irrational, the elimination of fantasies. Freud and Marx have this, at any rate, in

common. As a result of which sociologists are employed by big business, ethnologists are employed, anthropologists are employed, experts are employed whose claims are undoubtedly scientific and not intuitive.

And what has happened? What has happened is a revolt against this in turn. It's a revolt against an organised world; it's a revolt against a spick and span world; it's a world in which it is maintained (rightly or wrongly) that because everything is reduced to figures, because everything is reduced to databanks, because everything is reduced to statistics, human lives are screened from the eyes of these people by massive, impersonal data, which prevents them from seeing, that what they're operating on is human beings, and not a lot of human material, which is what the nineteenth century believed in.

This is a return to something earlier. This is a return to something like natural law, which says that human beings have rights, they must do their thing, even in the interests of happiness, of organisation, of order, of efficiency. You can't deprive a man of the right to stand on his head and crow like a cock if he feels so inclined²¹ – provided, perhaps, he doesn't do any harm to anyone else. That's a mild, liberal, minimal form of it. It can take a much more violent, vindictive and explosive form, which doesn't mind if it harms other people: anything which breaks through the accursed box in which we are contained is in order. The important thing is to upset the entire box, and the box, ultimately, is the box both of technology and of science. So we have a complete reversal of roles.

Today we have a huge anti-rationalist, anti-scientific movement adopted in the name of authenticity, of liberty, of everything which the existentialists preached. There is nothing in the world from which we can deduce how men should be. Every man has within his own breast certain desires which he must be allowed to fulfil. Any form of organising human beings, or shuffling them, or in any

²¹ Constant, *Principes de politique* (1815), chapter 1, 'De la souveraineté du peuple': *Écrits politiques*, ed. Marcel Gauchet ([Paris], 1997), 318 (the example is IB's).

way ordering them about, or putting them, each person, into a slot, or trying to create a society out of human beings as if they were human material for an edifice – all this is a derogation, an insult, a maiming, and a vivisection of living human nature. This goes straight back to the doctrines of 1780 in Germany, of 1790, 1810, 1820, with this huge anti-rationalist and anti-scientific bias, directed against exactly the same forces, namely the great edifice of French science, which was regarded as a huge mass of generalisations, which left out that which these people regarded as most valuable – individual contact between human beings, specific emotions in the head of a specific man at a specific time, love of life on the part of particular individuals, as opposed to more general ideals, which they supposed to be dehydrated, encapsulated, and somehow rendered dehumanised in the form of great scientific generalisations. I daresay – I'm not a prophet (I expect that many people here know a great deal more about this than I do) – that this too will pass, and will once more give way to a wave of re-rationalisation, re-uniformisation. The whole plea for variety, as I told you at the beginning of my lecture, is something new. The idea that there is no one truth, that every man has his own truth, doing your thing, the whole idea of saying, 'This is true for me; it isn't true for you' – all this is comparatively new and is a form of revolt against uniformity and order as such.

What it really comes to is this (as I told you before): If a man says, 'All grass is red', or, 'Twice two is forty-seven', we are not apt to respect him, even if we're quite kind to him and try to cure him, as most people in this room, I daresay, would be. But if a man produces moral or political propositions that are equally extravagant, we tend to be respectful, because we no longer believe in the existence of objective truth in these matters, or the possibility of proving or disproving it by either experimental or observational means. I don't wish to preach, or to say whether this is true or false. I merely wish to state that this is so, and has been so, since the days of the Greeks, and is a perfectly regular part of the turning of this particular wheel. Therefore, so far as the subject is relevant at all, the only thing I should like to stress is the

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extraordinary paradox by which the most advanced revolutionary ideas of thinkers of the nineteenth century, in the name of which many of their views are held today, are the exact contradictory of that which is today maintained, and have always been so. People have always used great names to maintain exactly the opposite of whatever the great names stood for.

This is a remarkable fact about our day. It is fundamentally a wave of Romantic, individualistic, self-expressive, creative expressionism – all kinds of protests against rules, against regulations, against any form of copying from reality, against any form of contact with reality, of which things like surrealism and existentialism were the mere harbingers.

Having said these things, all I can tell you is that I don't know what to do with them. I hope that they are grist to your mill. I am not a mill, nor a miller; all I am is simply a carter, who has brought all this grist before you. I hope that it may be of some interest, some use.

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