



## **Romanticism, Politics and Ethics**

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# Romanticism, Politics and Ethics

This a lightly edited transcript of an Alexander S. Keller Lecture sponsored and organised by the University of West Hartford, Connecticut, and delivered (without a text) at the King Philip School, West Hartford, at 8:30 p.m. on 14 January 1963. It was recorded, and broadcast at 10:05 p.m. the next day on WTIC. The introductory remarks by the hosts and the question period at the end of the lecture are included here.



*From the front page of Hartford's University Callboard, 16 January 1963*

### INTRODUCTORY

VINCENT COFFIN<sup>1</sup> Ladies and gentlemen, in the approximately four years that I have had the pleasure of presiding after a fashion over some of the Keller Lecture exercises, I have been so much impressed by one thing in particular, which I would like to mention to this audience tonight, and I will be scolded for doing it, as I'm not supposed to do this, exactly; but because one of my good associates is to have the honor of

<sup>1</sup> Vincent Brown Coffin (1897–1980), first Chancellor of the University of Hartford (1959–67).

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introducing the speaker tonight, I would like to say this right here and now, that the contribution of the Keller Lectures to the University of Hartford's programme is perfectly remarkable, and I would like to pay tribute to one lady for whom I have formed the highest admiration and the greatest affection, the sponsor of this series, Mrs Alexander Keller herself, not just because she is a charming person and of great skill in the planning of these series over the years, but because of her tremendous ability to secure for us the outstanding speakers, really, in the world. I ask you, ladies and gentlemen, who else could procure for us in the course of one season – and I wish I could say it were wholly the prestige of the University of Hartford which drew them here: this day will come, is coming, partly through this influence, but it hasn't yet come, to this point – no, mostly through personal persuasion and a dedication to getting a wonderful job done, has Mrs Keller this year brought to us, and to you, Dr Archibald MacLeish, Dr Harlow Shapley, and tonight Sir Isaiah. Who anywhere could possibly have done better? A salute, please, to Mrs Keller. [*applause*]

The speaker tonight will be presented to you by my associate Professor Henry Grattan, Associate Professor of English at the University of Hartford, a Doctor of Philosophy from Yale, a former member of the faculty of Mount Holyoke and of Hobart College, a gentleman whose company we have greatly enjoyed since he has been on our campus, and who has served as chairman of the faculty committee on the Keller Lectures with great distinction and great success. Professor Grattan. [*applause*]

HENRY V. GRATTAN Sir Isaiah Berlin, Mr Chancellor, Mrs Keller, students and faculty of the University, ladies and gentlemen: We learned from a recent issue of a weekly news magazine that, on an evening just before Christmas, Sir Isaiah Berlin sat in front of a fireplace in the White House and spoke to a small group of our governors, including the President, about the Russian novel. All Souls, Oxford, of which Sir Isaiah is a fellow, has many fireplaces, some big ones and very many tiny grates; and in the shadows cast by the flames of the coal that burns in them, for many generations men of great distinction and influence in England prime ministers, churchmen, authors, soldiers, and sometimes unclassifiable heroes, have come, especially over the weekends, to talk with and listen to the scholars All Souls nurtures. Here we have no fireplace. We are not in the White House, although to be sure we are in a school named

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for an authentic American king. Nor is the University of Hartford, Oxford. Not yet, I mean.

Nevertheless, these Keller Lectures, the speakers for which have been chosen now for six years, with such intelligence, courage and taste, by Mrs Keller, make the University and the town proud. They point a way in which an urban university can fecundate its surroundings with interest in knowledge, just as the coming of the scholars to Oxford in the twelfth century changed that town from a mere river crossing to one of the world's famous cities of light. Tonight, the Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford is going to speak to us, and I may add that this lecture will be broadcast tomorrow night at 10:05 o'clock over WTIC, and furthermore, our speaker will respond to questions from persons in the audience at the end of this evening.

Sir Isaiah has written a great deal. He is a wonderful writer. He can show in a flash the affinities between opposites, Virginia Woolf and Tolstoy, for instance, and then he can turn at just the right moment from public events to inner conflicts, of which he has the most subtle understanding. His subject this evening is 'Romanticism, Politics, and Ethics'. I do not know at all what he is going to say about the effect upon us of Romanticism, that paradoxical complex of feeling that bequeathed us, on the one hand, modern nationalism, and on the other, a certain rueful anti-industrialism. But we can be certain of his concern with the ultimate problems which, as he says in his book on the historical philosophy of Tolstoy, *The Hedgehog and the Fox*, face young men in every generation, namely good and evil, the origin and purpose of the universe and its inhabitants, the causes of all that happens.

Ladies and gentlemen, Sir Isaiah Berlin. [*applause*]


ISAAH BERLIN Thank you very much indeed. I'm afraid the compliments paid to me are more than my due, but it's much nicer getting more than one's due than merely one's due, and for this I am most grateful.

I'd like to begin with one apology, and that is this. I'm afraid I speak rather fast in a low voice, and it's quite possible that people at the back of the room may not be able to hear clearly or understand. If they can't hear, and if nevertheless they wish to hear, and on that assumption alone, I should be grateful if they behaved in some mildly eccentric fashion; that is to say, if they lifted their hands or shuffled their feet or did something

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to attract my attention, in which case I shall do my best to proceed more loudly and more slowly. I can't promise to succeed, but at least I can try.

ALEXANDER S. KELLER  
MEMORIAL FUND LECTURE SERIES



*Speaker*  
**SIR ISAIAH BERLIN**  
Oxford Professor, Author, Diplomat

**Romanticism, Politics, and Ethics**

Monday  
January 14, 1963  
8:30 pm

King Philip School  
100 King Philip Drive  
West Hartford, Connecticut

sponsored by  
**UNIVERSITY OF HARTFORD**

*Programme for the lecture (front)*

## ROMANTICISM, POLITICS AND ETHICS

### KELLER SERIES TO CLOSE FIFTH SEASON WITH SIR ISAIAH BERLIN

Sir Isaiah Berlin, English historian and diplomat, will be the third and final speaker in the fifth season of the Alexander S. Keller Memorial Fund series.

The noted savant will speak at 8:30 p.m. Monday night, Jan. 14, at King Philip School, 100 King Philip Dr., West Hartford. All Keller talks are free to the public.

Sir Isaiah is Chichele Professor of Social and Political Theory at Oxford University, where he earned a Master of Arts degree in 1932. He is spending the current academic term at Harvard University, as Ford Research Professor of Government.

Prof Berlin is known chiefly for his definitive study, "Karl Marx, His Life and Environment" (1939); "The Hedgehog and the Fox" (1953), an essay on Tolstoy's view of history; "Historical Inevitability" (1954), a critique; "The Age of Enlightenment" (1956), a work on 18th century philosophers, and "Two Concepts of Liberty" (1958).

Sir Isaiah will also appear in Auerbach Hall at 10:15 a.m. Tuesday morning, Jan. 15, as the guest of UofH students.

As in past seasons, this year's trio of Keller speakers stems from the untiring efforts of Mrs. Alexander S. Keller of West Hartford. Mrs. Keller and the friends and associates of her late husband, an influential industrialist and civic leader, established the Keller Fund in 1958, in Mr. Keller's memory.

*Excerpts from Academic Procession, the faculty and staff newsletter of the University of Hartford, 2 January 1963, 4, 5*

### THE KELLER LECTURE

MY PURPOSE is to clarify something which has long fascinated me. Somewhere in the middle of the eighteenth century there was a change of attitudes on the part of human beings in the Western world which transformed both political and ethical views to a far deeper and more revolutionary extent than is usually supposed. The subject is not merely of historical interest, because it seems to me that in the present age we have inherited the consequences of this turnover, and it has made a difference to what people feel at present, both to modes of thought and to modes of action, far more dramatic and catastrophic than is usually stated in books of history or in books of the history of thought.

It isn't very often that large shifts of consciousness occur among human beings. When I speak of shifts of consciousness I don't mean new answers to old problems. Newton gave new answers to old problems about the nature of the universe, but the

problems remained the same – they didn't alter. It was merely that far better answers were produced, with a consequent alteration in, for example, the attitude towards the external world, and the birth of certain new natural sciences. When I speak of a shift of thought, I mean that the whole attitude towards the world – the concepts and the categories in terms of which people think – is in some extraordinary way transformed, so that old questions are not answered, but disappear. New questions appear, and questions which seemed to be of urgent importance before suddenly become dissipated and can scarcely be understood.

I don't wish to enlarge upon this, because it would take me too long, but it's something to do with the fact that human beings think in terms of some sort of models. To explain something to yourself is usually to try to think of it as being like something else. When people ask central questions in politics and ethics, for example, 'Why should anybody obey anybody else, rather than disobey them?' – which is perhaps the central question in politics – or 'What are rights?' or 'What is liberty?' or 'What are the purposes of life?', or more specific questions such as 'Are republics better than monarchies?' or 'What does it mean to say that there are natural rights as against artificial rights?', and questions of that type, which are traditional in politics – when people ask those sorts of questions, the tendency is to try to answer them in terms of something more familiar. For example, in Plato's day there was an attempt to explain the nature of society by analogies with geometry, about which something was known. Aristotle tried analogies with biology. Other people at later dates tried analogies with the law, and so we get the theory of the social contract. Or you said: No, this is not right, relationships between human beings are not like relationships between persons governed by the same laws; they are more like relationships between members of a family. And so other theories sprang up to explain that relations of people in society are more like relations between brothers and sisters than they are between, let us say, a man who sells a house and a man who buys house. This in its turn, although it cast a certain amount of light upon that which it was meant to explain, turned out again

to be some kind of straitjacket, and people felt that also to be inadequate if.

So new models spring up, and you say: No, no, it's not like this, it's more like that. It's not like a family, it's rather more like something else; a let us say the relations of the state and its citizens are more like, say, the liberal theory. The state really is a kind of policeman: all it's meant to do is to prevent collisions and to look after property. And then other people said: It can't be a policeman. We feel a certain amount of loyalty to the state; nobody feels loyalty to policemen. And so on. And the whole history of human thought is really an attempt to use one model after another for the purpose of elucidating something which appears to be obscure. When a big model disappears or crumbles, or is felt to be unilluminating, and some other model takes its place, a large shift in consciousness occurs. It seems to me that something of this kind occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, and that this has made an enormous difference to thought and feeling.

Now let me be more specific. Until, roughly speaking, the middle of the eighteenth century, from, say, Plato onwards, for more than a two thousand years, certain assumptions were made about human behaviour of a very simple kind. People thought, first of all, that questions of how to live and what to do were capable of true answers, like any other questions. If you said, 'Why should we live like this rather than like that?', someone must have the answer. There were a great many differences about what the answer was, and there were a great many differences about who knew the answer. Some people thought that the answer was discovered by the priests; that it was to be found in certain sacred writings or in the interpretation of those writings by accredited Churches. Other people said that the answers were to be discovered in laboratories by scientists, because God doesn't exist, but is only a thing called 'nature', which is mechanical in character. Some people thought that the answers could be discovered only by certain experts who were good at finding out this kind of thing. Others said, on the contrary: *Any* man, by looking within his heart, can discover the answer: there are no moral and political specialists.



There may be specialists in physics, there may be specialists in geography, but on matters of conduct – questions like ‘What kind of life should we live?’, ‘What is justice?’, ‘What are rights?’, ‘What is the proper form of human government?’ – any rational man is in principle able to discover the answer if his mind is not beclouded by ignorance and prejudice. Again, there might be divisions of opinion about the types of question these questions are. People try to distinguish questions of fact from questions of value.

But throughout this period, for over two thousand years, there was a general assumption that just as questions of fact could be answered in certain obvious ways – if you asked the question, ‘How tall is this tree?’, you could measure it; if you asked the question, ‘How far is Constantinople from Timbuktu?’, you didn’t know, but you knew how it could be discovered, or who the proper experts were whom you could ask. So in the case of questions of politics and ethics also. How should we live? What is right? What is good? What is freedom? Why is it desirable? Why is freedom better than slavery? Why is justice better than injustice? Why is equality better than inequality? And so on. To these questions also there must be some kind of true answers, which somebody or other must be able to find out.

You might say: Men were too stupid ever to find this out for themselves. You might say that there was original sin, because of which you would never discover the answer completely. You might say: We don’t know it now, but we knew it once upon a time when there was a golden age, but then there was a fall, men fell into sin, and they no longer know the answer. Or you might say: We don’t know yet, but a golden age is to come – one day we shall know. You might say: We don’t know this on earth, but we shall know it in heaven. But somewhere there must be an answer – somebody knows. If we don’t know, our successors will know. If we don’t know, at any rate God knows. Somebody knows – there is an answer, because if there isn’t an answer, then the question is not a question; there is something wrong; it’s just a neurosis in that case, some kind of malaise on the part of human beings. A real question

must be capable of having one true answer, all the other answers being false.

This seems very simple, and is the foundation of Western thought. And since this is perhaps the most important question affecting human lives, bloody wars were fought by people who adopted different answers. Those who thought that the answer lay in the Catholic Church were presumably dissatisfied with those who thought that the answer lay in the individual conscience, and so wars of religion were fought. Those who believed that the answer lay in the laboratory were displeased with those who thought that the answer was metaphysical, or theological, or revealed only to mystical persons in moments of unique revelation, and so forth. But there was no doubt on either side of the fight, even when wars were fought and people burnt each other: all these persons believed that there was an answer, and only the enemy, whom you were about to burn or destroy, simply got it wrong, and not only got it wrong, but poisoned other persons into a similar condition of ignorance or error.

The three propositions upon which the Western tradition rested were: firstly, that to moral and political questions there exist objective answers, which are capable of being formulated; secondly, that human beings, to some degree, are able to obtain these answers, either privileged human beings or all human beings, but somebody, at any rate; and thirdly, that the answers cannot be incompatible with each other. It was clear that a true answer to one moral question and a true answer to another moral question must be compatible, because one truth, for logical reasons, cannot be incompatible with another.

If you could discover all the true answers – perhaps you won't be able to, for various reasons: because, as I say, you were too ignorant, or because it was too difficult, or because the questions were too complex, or whatever it may be – but if you could discover all the true answers and put them together, this would constitute a kind of global answer to the question of how life should be lived. It was a kind of jigsaw puzzle. If only you could put the bits together, there would be a total answer, some kind of

pattern in which life could be arranged. And if you could arrange life in that way, then men would be happy and just and prosperous and truthful and free, for ever. This was what was meant by saying that there was some kind of objective ideal towards which it was worth striving, which was presumably the same for all men, everywhere, at all times, because what is true must be true eternally, and must be objective and capable of being known.

These three legs of this stool – these three propositions – whatever men’s acute disagreements, and although they may have been divided by enormous differences, metaphysically, theologically, in every way – are common, I would aver, to the Western tradition. These three propositions were shattered by the Romantic movement, and this is what created an immense and revolutionary change in our whole mentality.

Let me enlarge a little upon what these propositions really mean. Take the eighteenth century, the Age of Reason as it’s sometimes called. People who were impressed by the work of Newton – who, after all, had managed, with extraordinary genius, to discover certain propositions – very few, very clear – from which you could deduce by perfectly intelligible, logical methods the position and movement of every particle in the universe – people who were impressed by this stupendous achievement supposed that you could really do the same thing in the moral and political world as well. After all, what was the problem? The problem was to find out what to do. The problem was to find out how men should live. All you needed to do was simply to ask yourself what men craved for. You had to determine what human nature was. This can be determined in exactly the same way as you determine the nature of a tree, or a stone, or a lizard, or any other object in nature. Having determined what human nature was by observation, by anthropology, by sociology, by all the methods open to the sciences, you then simply had to find out what this nature would be strengthened by, what it craved for, what it needed. After you discovered what it needed, you then had to discover how to produce it, how to procure it, how to provide it, and this, after all, was simply the task of the sciences. All you needed to know was

what men wanted, and then how to give it to them. And this was the ideal of the rationalists in the eighteenth century.

The only thing to do was to avoid error. Theologians and metaphysicians had simply made mistakes about human nature. They said there was an immortal soul – there is no immortal soul. They said the world was created in a given year – it was not: it was created in some quite different fashion. They maintained that there were certain acts, for example self-immolation or asceticism, which were human duties – but by examining human nature in a sane, scientific, anthropological fashion, by seeing how human beings behaved in China, in Peru, in Iceland, in Italy, in England, in Kamchatka, wherever it is – you would discover that this was in fact not that which human nature craved for. If you could find out what beavers and bees wanted, you could equally find out what human children, or women, or men, or redskins or blackskins wanted. Once you discovered that, your morals and your politics would be put on a sound scientific basis.

All that was necessary then was to make the right inventions – for which genius, of course, would be wanted – for the purpose of giving people what they needed: food, shelter, liberty, an organisation in which they would obtain least friction, maximum happiness, and all the rest of it. This is the point of view which was shattered, as far as politics and ethics are concerned, by the Romantics of whom I am about to speak.

Things started in a comparatively innocent fashion. The chief culprit in this particular story is that very un-Romantic, severe, schoolmaster-like figure of Immanuel Kant, who certainly had no notion of what the consequences of his particular propositions were likely to be. Without involving you in a lengthy lecture on moral philosophy, which I have no wish to give you, let me just say this. One of the things which Kant most deeply stressed was the fact that if a man was truly to be called moral, then what he does must be an act of free choice on his part. That is, to say that a man is moral is to say that he clearly and consciously chooses to do X rather than Y: because if choice is unreal, if men are determined, if I choose as I choose because the molecules in my body are such

that I cannot help acting as I do, if I do what I do because the climate in which I live, and the soil on which I live, and the circulation of my blood, the condition of my liver, and other natural factors make it absolutely inevitable that I shall behave as I do, in the way in which certain behaviourists in the eighteenth century were liable to say men behaved – if this is true, then there was no value in anybody's choice. I can't help acting as I do: I am an object in nature. Just as stones and trees were subject to rigid causality, if men were equally subject to it, then there was no point in praising and blaming people for doing or avoiding things which they couldn't help doing or avoiding.

Therefore the centre of Kant's position was that what we call morality depends on the fact that a man chooses what he does freely and openly, and that he chooses and is not chosen for, that he is the author of his own acts. This is a very central proposition for him, because if I choose what I do simply because I am overcome by passion, then I am behaving like an object – I am simply caused to act as I do, and I am not being free. If I do as I do because I am under the spell of emotions, because some psychologist could predict how I was likely to behave from examining me, in the way in which physicists examine stones, or zoologists examine horses, then it made no sense to say that certain acts were right, other acts were wrong, some were praiseworthy, some were blameworthy, which is a proposition which we all believed.

From this it followed, for him, that the most important thing in human beings was this capacity for freely choosing evil as well as good. It was creditable to choose good only because we deliberately refrained from evil. If we couldn't help refraining, there was nothing especially praiseworthy about choosing what was good. This is the heart of Kant's philosophy. The thing which he keeps on stressing is that men create their own values. Because men create their own values, they follow these values because they freely choose them. We live the lives we live because we determine ourselves to do it freely, when we might have chosen otherwise. If this is really true, then to use other people as means, that is to say,

to be paternalistic, to give people what you think is good for them, without putting them in a position where they can freely choose that which they want – to treat grown-up human beings as children, for example – that is the most heinous of all crimes which human beings can commit.

Kant, no doubt, like other moralists, disapproved of cruelty or injustice, or other things which are regarded as vices. But far more than cruelty or injustice, he disapproved of something which he regarded as the most monstrous of human attitudes, which is degradation or humiliation of other human beings, to treat other human beings as means towards your ends, to put other human beings into a condition of some kind of slavery, to use them for the purpose of obtaining not the ends which they were entitled to choose freely, but the ends which you chose, and which you are condition them into being means for. Hence the whole of Kant's rhetoric is directed against people who get at other people, people who somehow condition other people, people who do what is nowadays called brainwashing, people who treat other people as being unequal to themselves, as being mere instruments of their desires – because that, for him, dehumanises them. What is human in human beings is this unique capacity for choosing which is what material objects and animals lack.

If this is so, then of course a central quintessence of being a human being lies in the fact that you choose certain values, and that is why you must not, as a human being, be sacrificed to anything other than what you yourself choose. There is this great doctrine in the eighteenth century, which you find in Rousseau and in Kant, that unless I am governed by laws which I impose on myself, I am a slave. This is quite different from previous views. Previously you thought that the moral laws which you ought to obey were objective – something created by God, or something created by nature, something which I discover out there in exactly the same way as I discover trees or stones or anything else which is out there. The things to follow were some kind of objective principles which exist whether I know them or not. In the eighteenth century you first get this note, by which you say:

Freedom consists in obeying laws which I impose upon myself. There is a real break here between people who think real laws are laws which I do not invent, but which are out there whether I see them or not, and the attitude which says: If I obey laws which are not of my own making, which are of somebody else's making, then I am a slave. Hence the whole doctrine of democracy on the part of these thinkers, who say: I must participate in making the laws which I obey, because if I don't participate in making them, then they are imposed upon me from outside, and I am being treated as an object, I am being treated as a thing, I am pushed around. This is the most ultimate degradation and humiliation, it's a denial of man's humanity, it's the worst and most dreadful thing which any human being can do to another. This is the heart of the whole of the moral democratic doctrine upon which modern democratic states rest.

If it were left there, perhaps it wouldn't matter very much. Perhaps we could all accept that to some degree. But Kant's more Romantic followers, to whom I come in a moment, developed this doctrine in a direction which Kant would certainly have abhorred, but which I think was perhaps inevitable. Kant talked about moral imperatives which were discovered by looking within your own breast – certain orders which are not really true or false, simply commands which told you to act like this or like that, which issued from yourself to yourself. He called them rational. He said they bound all men equally. But for his followers something else followed. If it was really true that choosing freedom was the essence, was the heart of man, then might it not be the case that values were something which human beings, so far from finding them scattered about the universe like stars, out there whether we recognise them or not – might it not be that values were much more like something which I invent myself?

Let me make this a little clearer. Take the concept of nature, which is central here. The ordinary thinkers of the eighteenth century look upon nature as something to be imitated. Nature is a kind of model. There is this beautiful, divine harmony. In the Middle Ages it's a kind of natural hierarchy, with God at the top

and the amoeba below, and the important thing is to discover where I belong in this natural hierarchy, which I haven't made, but to which I belong. If only I can discover where I belong in this pyramid, and proceed to function accordingly, then I shall be happy, I shall be just, I shall be good, because that's what I was made for by God or by nature. In the eighteenth century we don't get the notion of hierarchy, because they deny that there is some kind of great metaphysical structure, the idea of which arose largely as a result of a combination of Greek and Christian theologies. But still, the notion of nature is paramount.

You get a lot of statements about Dame Nature, Mistress Nature. Nature is conceived of either as a tyrant which forces you to do certain things, or as a kindly mother whose voice you must listen to. If only you would look at the way in which nature does things, if only you would sit in some quiet glade and observe cows browsing and streams flowing, instead of involving yourself in the corrupt life of sophisticated cities, according to Rousseau – if only you did that, you would discover that there is a great natural harmony round you, and if only you could adjust yourself to this great natural harmony, you would be fulfilling your human nature in the way in which it was intended that it should be fulfilled. Intended by whom? If you are a deist you believe in God. If you are an atheist then you said nature. But in all these cases there is some kind of purpose here, which you can only discover, which is a purpose which is there whether you know it or not. The important thing is to discover what this purpose is.

Once you discover this purpose, you can switch yourself into the mechanism, you can adjust yourself to this objective harmony, and then all goes well, because all pain, all suffering, all tragedy comes from not understanding where you really belong. You are really born to be a flute-player, let us say, and you insist on playing the violin. If you were born to be a flute-player, then you will play the violin badly, you will be unhappy, you will interfere with the rest of the orchestra, things will go badly both for them and for you. The important thing is to discover what it was that you were meant to do. If only you could discover by some kind of inspection



– some people said by metaphysical means, some people said through the laboratory, by anthropology and sociology, others used other methods – if only you could discover in the proper way what part you were meant to play in the orchestra (which is a kind of typical simile or metaphor used at that time); if only you could discover, then you would find that the flute was really the instrument for you; and then, if you played the flute, you would be realised the rest of the orchestra would play in harmony with you, and all would be well. This is the notion.

With Kant you get something very different. If the important thing is choice, if the value of a man's act consists in the fact that he freely determines himself in a certain direction, whereas he might have determined himself otherwise, and the value resides not in the fact that he gets things right but in the fact that he chooses freely, then nature ceases to be a model, ceases to be something which you have to imitate, have first of all to find out about, to describe to yourself and then ask yourself: Where do I come in? What is my particular function, or part in this particular play? What you then do is you look upon nature as so much raw material which you mould consciously to your own self-conceived purposes. So nature ceases to be a model and becomes some kind of challenge. Nature ceases to be a pattern which you try to adjust yourself to, and becomes simply so much raw material, almost hostile, a sort of slag heap, a mass of stuff which you consciously mould into the pattern which you freely determine yourself, because if you don't freely determine it yourself then you are to that extent not being a moral being. And this is a tremendous shift.

With the notion that nature is no longer something to be imitated you slowly get another notion growing up, which is what I tried to speak about at the beginning, which is the replacement of one model by another. In earlier times, the scientists of the eighteenth century said nature is nothing but one vast mechanism, exactly like a machine, and the thing to do is to find out which particular cog, which particular wheel or lever, you are in it – you or your society, your Church, your nation, your race, your profession, or whatever it might be. Others were dissatisfied with

the notion of mechanism, and talked about organism. They said that the relations of men to one another were different from the relations of cogs or wheels, and more like the relations of hands and feet and heart and liver and brain in the human body. Some thought one analogy was better, others another, and gave reasons for it.

But all this presupposes that you have to indulge in some kind of investigation. You have to find out where you are. Knowledge is the important thing. What you must do is find out what the world is like, and then you must adjust yourself to the world. You must find out what reality is like. The doctrine from Plato onwards is: You had better know what reality is like, because if you don't know what reality is like, you will act in some mistaken fashion, and then reality will get you in the end. The danger always is that you will somehow make a mistake – tragedy. The whole idea of tragedy is error. It may be inevitable error, because you were too stupid to get out of the way, or because malicious gods play tricks on you. Maybe you can't help yourself. But tragedy always arises from the fact that people do not act in a way that harmonises with other people. The important thing is knowledge. And the people to respect and to admire are the people who get things right – the sages. The sage might be a scientist or he might be a priest. But the worship and the respect is always for the man who knows what things are like, and adjusts himself accordingly.

With Kant and his successors this alters. The new model is a model much more of the arts than it is of the sciences, and this really is a great shift. The notion, suddenly, is freedom, spontaneity, self-determination. Is not life more like a work of art than it is like, simply, the succession of cause and effect in nature? Cause and effect in nature are a kind of inexorable mechanical process. If men are simply caused to do what they do by the composition of their blood, or by the climate, or by the society in which they live, or by their institutions, or by other causes, then there is no sense in telling human beings that they are free, or that they have duties, or that they have ideals, or anything of the kind. This is true only if they are not, wholly at least, determined by their environment, our

not wholly objects being played upon by forces which they cannot control.

The great analogy, the most characteristic human activity which these people could think of, which involved you in a free choice, was the activity of the creative artist. Supposing I asked a question of an artist, 'Where is the symphony before the composer has composed it? Where is the picture before the painter has painted it?' According to the theories of people like Plato, there is of course some divine archetype, there is something which he has to copy, something which he has to reproduce. There is some divine original somewhere which the artist somehow tries to make concrete here on earth. But by the time you get to the late eighteenth century, this is no longer the view. Where is the symphony before the composer has composed it? 'Nowhere' is the answer. Where is the dance before the dancer has danced it? Where is the walk before I have walked it? It's an apparently idiotic question. The walk before I have walked is not anything. The walk is the walking. The symphony is the composition. The painting is the result of, or the content of, the act of painting. Men are not objects. Men are continuous activities of some sort. They are actors committing themselves to certain courses of action.

If you say, 'Where is the symphony before the composer has written it?', and you say, 'Not anywhere', then you say, 'What *is* this process, then? What *is* the symphony?' The symphony is an invention. The difference between invention and discovery is of great importance. Before the historical moment of which I speak, namely the last third of the eighteenth century, which is when the Romantic movement originated, for these purposes – before that the whole emphasis lay upon the fact that out there there are truths, and it's very important to discover them; that there is a structure of reality, a *rerum natura*,<sup>2</sup> which some people are better at finding out about than others. If only you can find out what this *rerum natura* is – for example, that God exists or doesn't exist, that things have purposes or do not have purposes, that human beings want

<sup>2</sup> 'Nature of things'.

this or want that, or are made happy by this or are made unhappy by that – if only you can discover that, then and then only will you be all right.

There might be tremendous differences. Some people maintain that there are certain moral and political truths which are good for all men, everywhere, at all times, which is called the doctrine of natural law. Others deny this and say: What is good for Persians is not good for Parisians; what is good for persons in the seventeenth century is not necessarily good for people in the nineteenth century. Montesquieu, Hume, relativists, subjectivists simply denied the proposition that there were certain universal principles of eternal validity, timeless and for ever true, which applied to all men, everywhere, at all times. But still, even they, even these sceptics and these subjectivists, did maintain that if you studied what your condition was like in Persia in the eighteenth century, you could at least discover what it was that had made the Persians happy or prosperous or wise or just. And if you'd asked about the Peruvians in the thirteenth century, you could discover what had been good for the Peruvians. What was good for the Peruvians is not necessarily good for the Chinese, but something is good for the Peruvians, something is good for the Chinese, and these things do not necessarily clash. So that even the subjectivists, even people like Hume, who said, 'Don't look outside for values – values are simply subjective inclinations, more like tastes, more like subjective desires', simply invited you, instead of examining some imaginary outer realm to discover what the principles of action should be, invited you to use psychology instead. When you say something is good, you really mean that you like it, or that you are in favour of it. In that case we have to have competent field psychologists to find out what most Englishmen of the eighteenth century would be made happy by, or what most Chinese in the eighteenth century would prefer. But this is discoverable. These are truths. You can find out the facts, and once you find out the facts, you can act upon them.

If it is the case that values are not discoverable at all, that they are much more like something made – not found, but made; not

discovered, but invented – then the whole picture changes, and you get this Romantic model which says: Life is much more like art than it is like nature. If you say all, ‘What is good?’, good is that which human beings make out of their lives. Good is that towards which human beings direct their lives. What are these things? They are what human beings invent for themselves. These values are human precisely because people needn’t follow them, but follow them because they invent them for themselves. The German philosopher Fichte was perhaps the most consistent articulator of this doctrine, but it’s to be found among almost every Romantic of this age.

Let me tell you about some of the peculiar consequences of this – for example, the notion of idealism. I don’t mean idealism in the philosophical sense. I mean idealism in the common or garden sense in which you say, ‘So-and-so is very idealistic’, or ‘Some human beings are more idealistic than others.’ ‘Idealism’, which is such a very common word, and people use it all the time now – would have been unintelligible in this sense before 1750, literally unintelligible. That is what I mean by saying that something large happened, that a whole new cluster of ideals, a whole new attitude to life, came into being then, however it may have done so.

Let me give you an illustration of what I mean. When we say somebody is idealistic, what we usually mean is that we don’t know whether we approve of his views or not, but we admire very much that he is prepared to sacrifice his life, his wealth, his health – everything about him – for the purpose of following some disinterested purpose, even though we may disapprove of this purpose. We think there is something noble, something admirable, about a man who determines himself, who is prepared to give everything he has towards the realisation of some ideal within him, of some goal which burns within him with a sacred flame. If, for example, during the seventeenth century wars of religion you said to a Catholic, ‘It is true that the Protestants believe what is false, but one must admit that they believe it with such integrity, such devotion, that they would give up everything for it – they are prepared to face the stake. This, surely, is a very admirable thing?’

This would not have been intelligible to anybody. On the contrary, the more violently you believe what is false, the more dangerous you are, the madder you are, the more you are likely to poison others. If you are a Christian knight fighting against the infidel, and you kill the infidel, then if you are at all a human being, and have decent human properties, you don't spit on his corpse. But you don't say to yourself: It's true that he believes terrible mumbo-jumbo, but how wonderful to believe it with such conviction. How wonderful to believe it with such passion. It's exactly as if you were to say now: Here is a man who believes twice 2 is 7; or, Here is a man who believes all grass is red. He hasn't been paid to do it; he really does believe that twice 2 is 7. Nobody has bribed him to say grass is red. Isn't it marvellous to have a man who is prepared to stake his all on the proposition that grass is red and twice 2 is always 7? On the whole, if a man did that, you would think him mad, not at all worthy of your commendation, not at all dignified.

Before the eighteenth century this was undoubtedly the case for religious convictions too, because you really thought there was a truth there somewhere, and if there was a truth, then to believe in falsehood was not a profitable thing. To believe in falsehood was in no way dignified, in no way worthy, and if you believed in the falsehood with absolute fanaticism, it merely meant that you were particularly dangerous and particularly insane, and particularly worthy of burning. It would have been no good saying to the Pope that what John Huss believed, he really believed very sincerely. It was no good saying to Calvin that what Servetus believed he believed very sincerely. The sincerer they were, the more dangerous they were, the more wicked they were, the more deeply plunged into error they were. The important thing was to get things right, and anything which stops you from getting things right, particularly if you are fanatically convinced of it, was bad, not good.

By the time you get to the nineteenth century, this is not at all the case. By this time, if you have two men, for example, who believe opposite things, supposing they are both affected by the Romantic movement – if you have two men who believe opposite things and these things are not compatible, it's thought to be far

nobler for one of these men to kill the other in a duel, say – either for A to kill B, or for B to kill A, or, best of all, for both to kill each other – far better than the most infamous of all solutions, which is some feeble compromise. The one thing which is not allowed is that people shall jeopardise or compromise their convictions. What is disgusting and thought of with extreme horror and nausea is the idea that, in order to preserve your miserable life, you are prepared to admit, or are prepared to live as if, what you know to be true isn't true. Far better for you to lose your life for what you believe, no matter what the odds, than that you should arrive at some squalid compromise simply for the contemptible purpose of preserving peace and order. This is the typical Romantic attitude.

And so you have a whole new cluster of values which I don't think would have meant very much to men of a previous period – for example, integrity. Integrity isn't something which anyone talks about before a certain date: for example, the whole worship of minorities, martyrdom, by which you say failure is in many ways nobler than success. The typical holy figure of this period is someone like Beethoven. Beethoven is a man who is sitting in a garret. He is allowed to be dirty, unkempt, rude, ignorant and barbarous. The only thing which he is not allowed to do is to sell out. The one thing which he mustn't do is not to obey the inner voice which speaks to him, for the sake of popular applause, popularity, money, or any of the other wicked temptations which he has to resist. Otherwise it doesn't matter what he is. The whole figure of the lonely artist, the poor, unkempt, dirty, rude artist, sitting in a garret by himself, who has special rights, who is a kind of sacred object, because he is dedicated to a purpose within him – even if you disapprove of the purpose, even if you are not interested in the purpose itself – that is something brand new. And new concepts of this degree of power and influence are comparatively rare in the history of nations.

You have a whole cluster of virtues, as I say. The whole idea of fighting, no matter what the odds, that it's somehow nobler to perish in a battle when you know that you are going to be defeated, in a kind of quixotic way – better to do that than to calculate the

odds and say, ‘After all, if I am dead I shan’t be able to do anything at all; therefore I’d better not be dead’ – this is relatively new.

During the previous period this could never have been said. The important thing was to get things right. The important thing was to find out what the universe was like, and then adjust yourself to it, and be happy and be strong and be successful. The idea that failure is in some ways better than success is surely something very new. The whole worship of failures, minorities and martyrs, the idea that martyrs and minorities are somehow more sacred than the big battalions, is apparently new. Again, you get the notion that motive is more important than consequence. You can’t guarantee that you will be happy, because that depends on external factors. If the whole moral value of an act depends on what you yourself can do – on your free act of choice – the only thing you can be responsible for is your own motive. You can’t be responsible for the consequence. Therefore happiness is not a worthy ideal, not so much because isn’t desirable in itself, as because you can’t guarantee it. Since it’s part of the external world, it isn’t part of the proper moral effort of a man. All that you can be responsible for is that you will be pure in heart – that your motive will be sincere. What the consequences are is not in your power. And so you no longer get moral judgements in terms of consequences, which certainly was the case before – for someone like Aristotle and for everyone who followed – by which you said that the important thing is that human beings should achieve certain things; it doesn’t matter what – works of art, certain political establishments, the victory of the Church, whatever it might be – the important thing is to succeed. Failure is never valuable in itself. You now say: Provided the heart is pure, provided the motive is good, provided he doesn’t sell out, provided he is dedicated, provided he is completely free from any thought of betrayal, *that* is what gets you to heaven.

This of course arises out of Christianity, but it’s a secularised form of it. Christianity – and all religions, in a sense – were in favour of martyrdom. But you were a martyr to the truth. The important thing was you died for something which was true, which



was the most important thing in the world because it *was* true, and therefore salvation lay in it. The idea that it was right to be a martyr for something which might be true or might be false, but the value of which was that you chose it, that it happened to be an ideal which you yourself dedicated yourself to, no matter what anybody else thought, no matter whether public opinion was in favour of it or not, no matter whether there was objective evidence of its validity or not – this is something comparatively fresh and original. And that is the heart of the Romantic attitude to politics, as I will now try to explain to you.

In other words, it's really a kind of Christian attitude, which also lays stress on motives, but only because the motives are validated by the belief in the fact that God exists, that Jesus exists, that he said certain things, that there are certain things which are true about man and about God – if this wasn't true, the whole thing of course falls to the ground. That's why for Muslims to be doing this sort of thing was perfectly worthless. But by the time you get to the nineteenth century, you get to the notion of the noble enemy. The noble enemy is better than a vacillating friend. It doesn't matter that he is an enemy; it doesn't matter that he believes the opposite of what you believe; it doesn't terribly matter what you believe – the most important thing is to die for it. In other words, the attitude of mind towards what you are fighting for is of infinitely greater importance than the objective content of what it is that you believe. This is brand new.

This is all right, this is comparatively harmless, when it is confined to the world of the arts, and you simply say that the ideal human being is someone like a painter or a composer who doesn't look at filthy lucre, who doesn't look at worldly success, who simply listens to the sacred voice within him and tries to make concrete that which it orders him to do. But when it applies to politics, certain more sinister consequences follow, because if you suddenly apply it to politics, you begin saying: Well, not only paints, not only sounds, are materials out of which works of art can be made to which a man can dedicate himself, which he can freely determine himself to produce in accordance with an ideal which is

sacred because it's *his*, and not because it's objectively valid – because that's what *he* is prepared to die for, which is all that matters. This could also apply to political issues. For example, Napoleon. Napoleon bound his spell on the imagination of Europe not simply because he was a competent soldier, and not because he produced the *code Napoléon*, and not because he was a successful emperor of the French, but because he was conceived of as a kind of supreme political artist, a great political creator – only his material happened to be human beings instead of paints and sounds. And just as the composer is free to mould the sounds in whatever order he pleased, just as the painter is free to do whatever he liked with the colours and paints which he uses, so Napoleon demonstrated that it was possible to take human beings and mould them freely into splendid new combinations. The state suddenly emerges as a work of art. Lots of things have been said about the state before. The state has been regarded as a traffic policeman, the state is regarded as an organic unity, as the full expression of human aspirations. All kinds of things have been said by Aristotle and by St Thomas, by Hobbes and by Locke, by Rousseau and by others, but the new notion of the state as a work of art rests upon the new model in terms of which things are explained, the new model being that you create values – you don't find them, you make them.

This leads to the view that some human beings are capable of creation, and some are not. Those who are capable of creation are, in this view, entitled to use those who are not for the purpose of creating a tremendous work of art out of them. It's true that the people whom Napoleon manipulates may not enjoy it. It's true that, if you are a great political creator, you may inflict the most dreadful tortures and pains upon the unfortunate human material which you now mould in the way in which a sculptor moulds his clay. But if you aren't yourself capable of creating, you should feel it a privilege to be moulded, to be tortured, to be knocked into all these shapes by a genius who is about to create a splendid new artistic whole which is called the new kind of human society.

Out of this springs nationalism, for example. So long as you confined the notion of the creator to the individual, it remained, as I say, comparatively harmless. But now people began to say: Who is this self who creates? Who is the creator? And some said: But individuals hardly exist. I am what I am because I have been moulded by certain forces over which I have no control, and among them my fellow human beings. I think in symbols. The symbols in which I think exist only because I communicate with them with other people. If there was nobody to talk to, I wouldn't have any symbols, and if I had no symbols, I wouldn't think. Therefore human beings, by definition, are not solitary in the world, not islands, but organically connected with other human beings. The real creative unity is not myself but something else – say a race, say a state, say a culture, say a Church. And so you get the notion that the true creator is some kind of human group, and to this the individual must sacrifice himself. The human group is itself the artist which produces shapes as composers produce symphonies and as painters produce pictures. It's very easy to see how nationalism grows from this, because in order that my race or my nation or my establishment should mould itself in accordance with *its* ideals, I need to do a lot of damage to a lot of other people who unfortunately get in the way. And so you find in Fascism, too, were you get appointed leaders who are the great artists to whom I willingly submit, because if I cannot be the leader myself, it is something to allow myself to be the raw material for this splendid artistic creation. This is really the beginning of the whole thing.

Let me read you some quotations from the apparently harmless writings of Fichte – very few of them – to show you the kind of thing I mean. He says, 'I don't accept [what my nature says] because I must, I believe it because I will.'<sup>3</sup> And again, 'If man allows laws to be made for him by the will of others, he reduces

<sup>3</sup> *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800), book 3, 'Glaube': *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Sämtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6) (hereafter SW), vol. 2, 256.

himself to a beast, injures his inborn human dignity.<sup>4</sup> ‘Man shall be and do something.’<sup>5</sup> Man shall be a ‘quickening source of life’, not an ‘echo’ or an ‘annex’,<sup>6</sup> not a piece of driftwood, but someone who determines himself in a certain direction. And from this the whole Romantic theory then proceeds. In other words, the proper analogy is with the arts, and not with the sciences. The important thing is not to know, but to do.

It follows from this, if this is true, that there’s no reason for thinking that the various ideals which human beings may adopt will not collide with each other. Once you abandon the view that the answer to the question of how I shall live is in the form of propositions which are true or false, for which reasons can be given; once you abandon the view that there is one true answer to these questions, all the others being false – once you abandon that, you get into a position where you say: ‘These questions are not answered by propositions, these questions are not answered by statements of truths, these questions are answered by action, these questions are answered by artistic creation itself. Then, of course, my artistic creation may come into collision with yours. So the notion that all the answers must harmonise, and therefore there is a jigsaw puzzle, and there is some kind of ultimate answer which we may not know but which somebody knows, such that, if only we knew it, we should be able to live our lives harmoniously and be happy and just and good, disappears.

Then the notion of tragedy acquires quite a different dimension. Tragedy, hitherto, always rests on some kind of error. I do what I do: I kill my father unawares, if I am Oedipus; or I kill my mother Clytemnestra, if I am Orestes, because she killed my father,

<sup>4</sup> *Beiträge zur Berichtigung der Urtheile des Publicums über die französische Revolution* (Danzig, 1793) 1. 1, SW vi 82. More literally: ‘If [a man] allows a law to be imposed on him by the will of another, he renounces his humanity and turns himself into an animal.’

<sup>5</sup> *Über das Wesen des Gelehrten, und seine Erscheinungen im Gebiete der Freiheit* (Berlin, 1806), lecture 4: SW vi 383.

<sup>6</sup> *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (Berlin, 1808), no. 7, SW vii 374 (‘der Fluss ursprünglichen Lebens’, ‘the flow of original life’).

because I am in a certain state of mind which is erroneous – the gods have blinded me in a certain way. But if I knew the truth, then I wouldn't be doing these things. In other words, tragedy is always the result of some kind of ignorance, some kind of inability to cope, some sort of defect, which, in principle, is curable. But if ideals are not discoverable, if ideals are made, then this doesn't follow at all. Then it'll follow that it might well be the case that certain valid ideals are not compatible with certain other valid ideals. And here the Romantics showed a certain insight, because before them nobody, perhaps, said, what indeed people tend to accept now, that it may be the case that there are certain ideals to which human beings dedicate themselves which are not compatible with certain other ideals; that justice is not wholly compatible with mercy; or that if I know everything, I may not be wholly happy, which was not accepted before – if I know that I have cancer, this will make me less happy than I am now; or that complete liberty is not compatible with complete equality; or that complete efficiency is not compatible with a total degree of individual freedom; or that power is not compatible with virtue; and so forth. The idea that there could be ideals some of which various people could validly seek, which would not be compatible with equally valid ideals, and that tragedy consists in the inevitable conflict of ideals which cannot be squared, whatever you may do; that there is a certain logical incompatibility, not just factual, not just resting on temporary or incurable ignorance, but on the essence of the thing itself, in terms of which certain good things might not be compatible with certain other good things – that is something which emerges only after the Romantic movement.

The consequences of this are very peculiar in the present day. What do we ourselves believe? Supposing I ask you: Whom do you put higher in the moral scale? Do you, for example, believe that someone like Frederick the Great, whose motives may have been highly corrupt, who was a cynic, an egomaniac, in the ordinary acceptance of the word a scoundrel, but who undoubtedly made a large number of Germans happier than they were before, made them more efficient, gave them more of what they wanted – would

you say that Frederick the Great was a better man or a worse man than, let us say, someone like Torquemada? Let's assume that Torquemada was perfectly sincere: but he did torture a lot of innocent persons to death. And then you say: Torquemada's motives are perfectly pure, but the consequences were extremely painful, very disastrous and ruinous. Frederick the Great was, in the ordinary acceptation of the words, a dishonest, crooked, self-seeking, cynical, corrupt man. But the consequences of his acts undoubtedly bred order, justice, happiness and proficiency on the part of a large number of Germans, and probably affected Europe in the most excellent fashion. If you say this to yourselves, and you say, 'Which one of them comes higher?', we are confused.

Before the eighteenth century, there would have been no doubt. You had a perfectly objective code. You said those people were better whose acts conformed to principles the truth of which was objective and could be discovered by some sort of validated, proper means – whatever means you regarded as the right means for discovering these truths. When you get to the Romantics, you say there is no doubt at all. Of course that man is better who is pure-hearted, who is dedicated, who doesn't calculate, who doesn't reckon, who sacrifices the whole of himself, is prepared to bring himself, if necessary, as a sacrifice to his honourably held beliefs – therefore, Torquemada.

But now, today, it's not so certain, and we are heirs to both these points of view. We say, so much for motive, so much for consequence. We must reckon one, and we must reckon the other. This is a typical, curious, ambiguous condition which shows how much we have inherited from the Romantic movement. The notion of idealism, for example, the notion that a man may do a lot of harm but you really shouldn't be too hard on him, because his motives are pure, because he meant well, is brand new. The notion that minorities should be protected simply because they are minorities, that martyrs are respectable because they are martyrs, even though the things to which they are martyrs seem to you absurd. This is, relatively speaking, new. There are certain insights which the Romantics produced which undoubtedly have

lingered with us to this day. For example, that men must not be slaughtered to abstract ideals, because men create their own ideals; or the notion that motive counts; or the notion that purity of heart is important; or the notion that no objective reasoning, no demonstration that reality is like this or like that – for example, that there is an inevitable pattern in history, or that it's clear that, whatever you may do, the enemy will overwhelm you, therefore it's wiser to submit – that these arguments are not decisive provided that you have some kind of private ideal of your own to which you are prepared to sacrifice your life; that it's nobler to go to certain defeat, provided you are quite clear that this is what your life is dedicated to, than to scrap your ideal simply in order to ally yourself with the big battalions of history. That is something which we have inherited from the Romantics.

The thing which the Romantics have also left us, the evil part of their heritage, if I may call it that, is the notion that there are no common goods, the notion that everyone simply determines himself to act in whatever way he wishes. The kind of enormities which were practised by Fascists, Communists, whoever it might be, produced certain qualms, produced resistance, produced a sense of shock and horror on the part of the people on whom they were inflicted, suddenly became a demonstration that there does, after all, exist a certain core of common values which human beings accept in most places, at most times – I won't say everywhere, all the time, but in most places, at most times – in terms of which alone they are able to communicate with each other. In other words, if I say to somebody, 'Why do you think it's wrong to bear false witness?' or 'Why do you think it wrong to punish innocent victims?', which most people in most times have certainly thought extremely wrong, it's then artificial to say: Because I have determined myself in that direction, I might just as well have chosen the opposite, but I happen to believe in this, this is my particular work of art; I happen to be an impressionist painter, you happen to be a cubist painter. If you believe the opposite, you believe the opposite. I happen to believe this, you believe that, and there is no common ground between us.

This is not so. You could say that if you found a human being all of whose moral convictions were such that it was impossible to communicate with him; if you found a human being, as in Hume's example, who was prepared to destroy the entire world in order to cure a pain in his little finger; if you discovered this human being, you wouldn't say, 'He has a different code from me; he has committed himself to a different ideal from me; he happens to be an existentialist who doesn't believe that there are metaphysical guarantees of anything, who simply believes in gratuitously committing himself to a certain form of life the reason for which is that he has committed himself – and there can be no other reason.' You wouldn't say that. You would say: A man who is prepared to destroy the world in order to cure a pain in his little finger is certifiable. And if you said that, you would mean that you would not regard as a normal human being someone who did not accept our common values; that part of what you mean by 'human being' is a certain common core of moral beliefs which most human beings, whatever their political or moral convictions might be, accept; and that unless they have these convictions, communication with them is impossible. We define human beings in terms of being able to be communicated with. This demonstrates that these so-called moral and political values are not arbitrary in the sense in which the Romantics wished to make them. When they are arbitrary, they are not called moral. We don't dispute matters of taste. There we think it's all right for different people to have different tastes. It doesn't shock us. We think manners can be different. We think customs can be different. But the things about which we do not believe that differences can be too wide, though we recognise some, we specifically for that reason call moral. We call them moral precisely because there is an implication that to be a human being at all is to accept certain forms of life, to accept certain principles in terms of which alone any human being can understand any other human being. This is the ultimate core of the natural law doctrine, though it can be interpreted in a very empirical and very sociological fashion.



But there is no doubt that the Romantic movement made a big dent in the somewhat naive acceptance of this view before the eighteenth century. The point about the Romantic movement is that it for ever impressed upon the imagination of mankind the idea that too many rules, too many principles, really didn't bind mankind; that there were exceptional persons; that if you asked a man why he behaved as he behaved, and if he answered, 'Because this is my ideal, because this is what I want to dedicate my life to, because that's how life looks to me, because this is the way in which I look at the world, this is what is sacred to me, this is that for the sake of which I am prepared to fight and, if need be, die' – if a man says that, what he is saying is not absurd, whereas before 1750 you would certainly have thought it absurd. You would have thought it as absurd as saying, 'Twice 2 is 7: something for which I am prepared to die.' The reason you do not think it absurd is that you do not think that truth in moral and political matters is the same sort of thing as truth in scientific or factual matters.

This proposition, whatever its implications may be, the Romantics have established even in our consciousness. This is an enormous shift in European consciousness. The fact that we do pay attention to motive, the fact that we do think that sincerity and integrity are virtues in themselves, is new. I don't say it's good; I don't say it's bad. I merely wish to argue that this whole cluster of virtues – idealism, integrity, dedication, all these words which we use so easily, including the word 'creative', which has become one of the most hackneyed words in the language, and which has come to mean practically nothing at all now – these words were brought into the world by the enormous shift in consciousness which the Romantic revolution induced, and which seems to me to have altered the attitudes and actions of human beings, perhaps for ever.

QUESTIONS<sup>7</sup>

HENRY GRATTAN Ladies and gentlemen, at the end of this fascinating and original development of the great differences between the age of reason and the age of Romanticism, Sir Isaiah has consented to answer questions that you care to propose to him from the floor.

1. *You've given us a vague[?] description of the downfall of Romanticism [...]*

I don't think that Romanticism ever fell down, it went on. Realism was a kind of reaction against the exaggerations of Romanticism, the exaggerations of people who wanted to assert themselves at all costs. The essence of Romanticism, I suppose, consisted in human beings who said: I am what I am, I choose what I choose. Whether I'm Napoleon conquering Russia, or I'm a man wearing a red waistcoat and leading a lobster on a lead in Paris and painting my hair green, which is what some Romantics in Paris certainly did, the whole purpose of all this was to say: I'm a free chooser of what I want, I'm an authentic man, I'm not drifting, I don't accept other people's judgements, I don't live as I live because I assume that other people's truths are true, I challenge everything and determine myself in accordance with my own subjective will.

That was Romanticism. Realism was a revolt against the view that this is in fact a correct view of human nature, that most human beings were that. The main achievement of the realistic novel is an attempt to analyse human beings in terms of motives and in terms of behaviour which is conditioned, which is induced in them by factors over which they haven't very much control, and which on the contrary demonstrate that they belong to the world of nature, and behave to the world of nature – that they are acted upon by the same kind of causes as natural objects are to a greater extent than the Romantics maintained.

But the Romanticism was never completely overthrown, never. Even to this day – if you ask what existentialism is, existentialism is pure modern Romanticism. Existentialists say: men try to justify their conduct by pleading various metaphysical or theological truths. All these truths are illusion. Men try to justify their conduct by pleading alibis, by saying:

<sup>7</sup> The questions are in places inaudible (there appears to have been no roving microphone). I have done my best, but my transcriptions should not be relied on. H.H.

God told them to do this, or the universe is like this, or these are objective principles which one has to follow. There are no such principles. These are merely attempts by human beings to shift responsibility. Men are what they are. They determine themselves as they determine themselves, and they might as well face this fact.

This is a pure Romantic position, in which you say, what is your motive for doing this? My motive for doing it's that I commit myself to this particular course of action. And you, who don't commit yourself, are really, by the very non-commitment, committing yourself to drifting along with the others. And this is no less a commitment than my conscious commitment. All you are doing is simply allowing yourself to drift with the others, which is a tacit commitment to being pushed about by external causes. This is a straight Romantic position, and not at all unknown in the present, I would say.

So that I don't know if I've answered your question correctly. To suppose there was a thing called Romanticism, which was knocked out by realism in a kind of duel, is certainly historically not correct. They are march side by side, as rival and incompatible views.

*2. Would it be correct to say that none of these positions in philosophy had ever been completely overthrown, but all that actually has been done is that each one has modified the ones that went before?*

It's too flat a way of putting it. There's truth in that, but 'modified' is too weak. When people discard one model and use another, for the time being you feel that the old model was no good at all, a kind of straitjacket. And you feel the new model is very liberating and splendid. And you use the new model for all that you are worth. You say mechanism is a ridiculous way of describing society, organism is the thing. Then, after you've used it for a bit, organism also appears to block out certain aspects of experience, and you use something else again. They don't exactly modify. Human beings oscillate between one model and another, sometimes using one, sometimes using another.

Certain very extreme and fanatical persons use only one model at a time. Most human beings have a large number – perhaps not a large number, but a number – of not wholly compatible ways of explaining life, which overlap with one another, but don't exactly modify each other. It's exactly like human beings who follow several ideals at the same time,

hoping they won't clash. If they do clash, they don't know what to do. That's what's called a condition of moral agony.

And this is what happens to countries. When a country follows a certain kind of model in its experience, and something dreadful happens – they have a huge economic crisis, or they're attacked by the enemy – then suddenly their ideals are switched, and they feel uncomfortable, because they don't wish to abandon the old, they can't not follow the new, they oscillate uncomfortably in between, and they try to marry them. These things prove very unmarriageable as a rule. And so, like most human beings, we try to hope that these things will harmonise, and if not, do our best.

But it's not quite modification, that. Modification implies a sort of peaceful process of assimilation, which isn't what happens.

*3. If you were classifying a Marxist within the categories of early eighteenth-century rationalism as contrasted to early nineteenth-century Romanticism, which category would you put it in?*

Which category would I put Marxism in? It's a perfectly reasonable question. Hegel and Marx both were, of course, extreme anti-Romantics. And what they wished to do was to put humanity on the rails again. That is roughly what happened. You have people dashing off in all directions, people following their own whims, or following their own private ideals, which means there are no objective values. The old objective values of the eighteenth century are plainly discredited, largely by the failure of the French Revolution, not so much by being refuted so much as because the French Revolution was made in their name, it was a fearful failure, and this automatically discredited the official ideals in terms of which it was made.

And so there's an attempt to say: But there is objective reality about certain moral and political positions. This is what mankind is like. Mankind is a body of men divided into classes. These classes clash. The clash of classes produces the following consequences. You belong to one class or another. Your life is likely to be modified in the following fashion. Your moral ideas and your political ideas are conditioned by the class to which you belong. Therefore the proper thing for a rational being who wishes to live his life in a non-self-frustrating, non-self-defeating way is to understand what reality is like. Reality isn't what these other people said it was. Reality isn't static. Reality isn't like nature. It's like a

battlefield of a certain kind. I, Marx, will teach you what reality is like, and when you've learnt that, it'll be mad not to live accordingly. In other words, he still belongs to the category of people who say: If you know what things are like, you can't help adjusting yourself to it. Whereas for the Romantics, no amount of knowledge will prevent you from doing whatever it's you determine yourself to do. Knowledge by itself doesn't help.

So that Marx is a strict anti-Romantic, whose whole position is to try to reconstitute some kind of objective ground of political action by explaining what history is like, by explaining how rational beings are to avoid suicide.

4. *Sir, would you say that Western government today is more dominated by ideals or results?*

Like all human beings, a little bit of both. My whole position was that we're the helpless victims of two incompatible theories.

5. *At one point in your talk you suggested that the later development of Romanticism would have been distasteful to Kant with his belief that each man must be treated as an end, and that it was unjustifiable to say, as some later Romanticists did, that someone like Napoleon was justified in controlling the whole of France, but in somehow greater honour than the rest. I wonder if you would expand upon that point. I wonder in particular if you would say that when Kant valued, his superiority to the later thinkers was that he had some trace of this view that there is an objective truth, namely that men are equal, are worthy of respect, whether it's that element in his thinking which somehow [...] create the balance to the view that life is art, or is it something else? I [...].*

There are two things there. Kant certainly didn't think life was art. Certainly not. At no point did he think that. And it's, of course, a false belief, as far as I can see. And he was right not to think it. It was an extraordinary Romantic aberration. I don't wish to defend it. Art is art. Life is life. And the proposition that life is art merely means that it's a new analogy, a new image, which certainly produced fructifying results, but as with all these similes, once it became pushed a little too far, once it became blinding to human beings, it produced distortions. But there are two things about Kant. One is the point you made, that he would have disapproved of Napoleon because, since human beings create values, to slaughter human beings, to anything, is wrong, because you

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can only slaughter what is lower to the higher. Since the highest thing there is is the individual and his values, to say that human beings should die for something which is invented for them by other human beings implies that these first human beings don't possess – are not themselves creators of values, but are obliged to be sacrificed to values created by others.

In other words, there are some people who are privileged creators of values, and others not. Some people know what the proper ends are and others don't know and therefore must obey the ones who do, which is a hierarchical principle which he denies, of course. All men are equal in respect of being followers of those values which they themselves create, and may therefore not be sacrificed to anything whatever, except the values they do create.

The second proposition about Kant is that he did think that all rational men must believe the same. This is precisely what the Romantics denied. Why he believed it's another matter, but he did think anybody placed in a certain situation, if he was rational, would certainly believe the answer to the problem of moral conduct to be exactly the same. Therefore it could not in principle be the case that, given the same question facing two different individuals, they could, if they were both rational, give different answers. And in this respect he belongs to the pure classical, old, pre-Romantic tradition, that there are objective answers. Only, for him, the answers are not given by inspecting nature. For him, the answers are given by inspecting some kind of inner, non-empirical self. But he is fully in the pre-Romantic tradition in supposing that there are objective answers binding upon all men in the same situation. This is exactly what the Romantics denied, precisely. So that is why he would have been outraged by the use inevitably made of his own principles.

*A recording of the lecture is available [here](#).*

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