

SOME OPPONENTS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

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*The following (unscripted) lecture was delivered in the Hall of Wolfson College, Oxford, on 11 February 1975 as the third of the Wolfson College Lectures for 1975, whose theme was 'The Enlightenment and Its Critics'. The following is a lightly edited transcript of a very poor recording. No attempt has been made to bring it to a conventionally publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars. The beginning of the lecture is missing in the recording. An attempt at a verbatim transcript was circulated as a libretto for a play-through of the recording on 20 March 2014, at a conference on 'Isaiah Berlin's Enlightenment' at Wolfson; that transcript contained a handful of mistranscriptions here corrected.*

*Henry Hardy*

[...] There were a great many who began the attack within the Enlightenment itself, and some indeed before it. But I propose to deal only with those who, though they stated their positions in somewhat exaggerated terms, did so in a much more vivid fashion, so that those more moderate and more sensible men who followed them perhaps spoke better sense, but less memorably.

Let me begin by saying that Professor Gay has perfectly correctly pointed out, in the excellent lecture which inaugurated this series, that the Encyclopedists, the *lumières*, were not a monolithic group: that the notion that they all believed exactly the same thing, that they all believed in the indivisibility of progress, that they were all optimists, that they all believed in natural science, that they all believed in some kind of linear advance of humanity which nothing could stop, that they all rejected religion, art and all the rest of it, and concentrated upon some kind of purely materialistic, purely scientific ideal, is not true.

Turgot, Condorcet, Holbach were, on the whole, optimists: Voltaire, Grimm, Rousseau, La Mettrie were profoundly pessimistic – certainly Voltaire did not think that much could be done with humanity as it was. Grimm thought it might take three or

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four hundred years or more to make human beings even faintly rational, and even that would be accomplished with the most appalling difficulties. Rousseau and Morelly and Mably believed in austerity and simplicity, and had a kind of rigorously stoic, rather Spartan ideal. Voltaire did not believe in this at all: Voltaire believed in the ripest fruits of culture. His ideal societies were the Athens of the 5th century bc, the late Roman Republic and early Empire, the Florence of the Renaissance and the great age of Louis XIV (about which there is nothing particularly austere or rigorous or simple), and in this respect he was followed by a good many of the others, certainly by people like d'Alembert, and indeed by the majority of the Encyclopedists, I should say.

Some were Christians, at least technically – Condillac and Mably were, after all, abbés; Voltaire and Rousseau were deists, though of rather different types. Helvétius, Holbach, La Mettrie, in most of his moods Diderot, were rigorous atheists. Outside France, Priestley, Price, Moses Mendelssohn firmly believed in the immortality of the soul: Diderot, Holbach, Helvétius believed that this was a pure fiction invented by priests. Some passionately believed in property, which became one of the cornerstones of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen in the French Revolution. Mably and Morelly did not believe in this at all, and believed that money and property were the root of all the evils of mankind.

So there were differences. And of course these differences did not seem quite so great, either in the perspective of history, which tends to obliterate these things, and tends to make people who believed the same sort of thing much closer and more similar to each other than in fact they were; and partly because their enemies tended to identify them with each other and did not much bother with the differences when what they wanted to concentrate on were the odious views which they were thought to hold in common. And indeed it is true that there were certain basic propositions that they did, most of them, hold in common. They certainly believed in naturalism – that is to say they believed that the sources of knowledge were not to be found in tradition, not to be found in sacred books, not to be found in priestly dogma, not to be found in some kind of occult metaphysical speculation, not revealed to some magic eye which penetrated empirical experiences in some rather special fashion. They believed that they were

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ultimately to be found in observation, in the observation of nature and in scientific research: that is to say, observation and experiment. At least for the most part they believed in this.

And they believed something else. They believed that the sources of human misery were ignorance, idleness – which led to ignorance – and the fact that there were certain childish fantasies in which human beings had been held for too long, partly as a result of their own incurable stupidity – in some cases incurable, in other cases curable – partly because it was in the interests of certain men who sought power to throw dust in the eyes of a great many men and teach them all kinds of fantasies, in order to preserve their own power. That is what Helvétius called ‘interested error’.<sup>1</sup>

This was the conspiracy view of history. I do not say they all believed that, but for the most part I think it could be said that they did. They did not believe in tradition, they did not believe in privilege, they did not believe in clerical censorship: their common assumption, on the whole, was that the only thing which could liberate mankind was knowledge; and the model of knowledge was provided, of course, by the great scientific inventors and discoverers. Just as Newton had managed, with a few relatively simple propositions, to determine the position and movement of every particle in physical space, so there was no reason why the same method, if applied to the social and moral problems which had plagued mankind for a long time, should not lead to equally certain and reliable consequences. The moral and political universe was in a state of chaos. There were a great many views knocking around

<sup>1</sup> [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 à nos sens, que l’on nous a faussement fait regarder comme suspects’. In his 1820 translation Samuel Wilkinson renders this as ‘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 seems entirely characteristic of Holbach, who writes, for example, of ‘erreurs utiles’ (‘useful errors’), *ibid.*, part 2, chapter 12, and of ‘hommes fortement intéressés à l’erreur’ (‘persons with a strong interest in error’) in *Le Bon Sens*, § 82. I am grateful to Roger Hausheer for putting me on to the trail of this hitherto elusive phrase – one of which Berlin was fond. Ed.]

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against each other without any specific authority or evidence for any of them. The whole thing was in a fearful mess, a kind of Augean stables, which only the application of a method which had been successful in the sphere of nature would ultimately manage to cleanse. This was certainly a very firm belief of a great many members of the Enlightenment. And the view was that, unless we obtained knowledge of what we were, what the universe was, what our position was in the universe, we should remain enslaved by it: that is to say, we should be victims – of chance, of nature, which we imperfectly knew and imperfectly interpreted, and of wicked men. We should be at the mercy of forces which we could not control, because we did not understand them. The only way of liberating ourselves was by understanding the universe in which we lived, and ourselves. And this could reliably be done only by scientific methods which had proved themselves, at any rate in the realm of inanimate nature. Know, and the knowledge shall make you free. This had been said many years before, by Jesus,<sup>2</sup> but it was not the kind of knowledge that he spoke about which these men were after. Spiritual or theological or metaphysical knowledge had led mankind into morasses; what was needed was the kind of knowledge for which positive evidence could be given by observers, making statements which were capable of being publicly checked and verified by any intelligent man applying himself to the problem. There was no such thing as occult knowledge; no such thing as private knowledge. Knowledge must be made open to public scrutiny. Only communicable knowledge of a public nature was worth having.

And knowledge was cumulative. We knew more than our predecessors; we knew more mathematics than Euclid or Archimedes; we knew more about medicine than Galen. We perhaps did not know quite so much about architecture as the ancients, in which case we must take lessons from the great treatises on architecture of the ancient world, and the great return to neoclassicism which discovered certain truths which had been distorted, perverted, obscured and otherwise lost during the long

<sup>2</sup> ‘And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free.’  
John 8:32.

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dark night of the irrational Middle Ages. That was, roughly speaking, the belief.

As a result of all these beliefs, a body of doctrine did grow, which was mainly embodied in the Encyclopedia, which promised to liberate mankind from the superstitions, the prejudices, the stupidities, the childish guesswork, the nonsenses on which humanity had been fed for far too long. And exactly the same thing was true about moral values – moral and political values. This was true not only of statements of fact but also of statements of what men should be and how they should live. Reason, which had been such a powerful instrument in describing and analysing the universe, would also provide men with answers to the question of what men should be and how they should live; what was good, what was right, what was useful, what would make men happy, what would make men just, what would make men virtuous. The view here is that of a kind of hidden treasure to which we must find the path. Previous generations had failed to do so. The path did not lie in the Bible, the path did not lie in metaphysics, the path did not lie in the primitive superstitions of ordinary folk. The path lay in only one place, and that is the region of scientific research. And if we could obtain all the true answers to all the questions which plague mankind – and you must remember that, if you were a scientist, at least at that time, you believed that to all questions there must be one true answer, all other answers being false, for that was surely the nature of truth and the nature of scientific enquiry – if ever you could obtain all the true answers and you put them together, they would form the jigsaw puzzle of human existence. By discovering the answers to such moral questions as what to do and how to live; what kind of political arrangements were best for mankind; what kind of moral values were those which had to be pursued – in this way you would finally be able to obtain a kind of blueprint, anyhow, of what the perfect society would be like. It might be difficult to obtain it, because men were stupid, because men were weak, because nature was against us for this or that reason. But at least you would know what you fell short of when you fell short of it, and this, at least, would be something. That was certainly the ideal of this age.

This is a doctrine which they inherited from humanism – from the Renaissance – and which they did a great deal to elaborate and to improve. There were a great many differences about where

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these answers were to be found. Some were intellectualist, like d'Alembert or even Voltaire; and some believed, like Rousseau, that the answer lay in the uncorrupted human heart. It was not the brain but the heart which had to be in the right place. If only people could free themselves from the corrupting influence of the institutions which had distorted them from their original natural selves, they would perceive what the proper goals of men were, in some luminous way. But what they all had in common was the belief that there were certain universal truths, true for all men, in all places, at all times; that these truths were, in principle, discoverable by the kind of methods which they had now come upon; and that once these truths were discovered and learnt, this would automatically improve human life in a very large, indeed in a very radical, fashion.

I can see that it must have been extremely exciting to live in those days. It must have been a very exalted moment of the human consciousness, on the part of people who felt that at last, at last, we knew what to do. At last we have shaken off all the error and the stupidity and the nonsense of the past. Condorcet talks about this in a very lyrical fashion in that famous *Esquisse*, where he says: 'Soon the sun will shine only upon free men, who will accept no master but their own reason; and tyrants and slaves, priests and their stupid and wicked tools will be seen only in the pages of history and on the stage.'<sup>3</sup>

It is rather like something which Keynes describes in one of his essays on his early moral ideas, when he felt, with his friends in Cambridge in the early part of the twentieth century, that at last, under the guidance of G. E. Moore, they knew the truth, they knew what the answer to moral questions was; they, for the first time in the history of mankind. They were the first generation to attain to this truth. The sense of 'Eureka!'<sup>4</sup> of having at last

<sup>3</sup> 'Il arrivera donc ce moment où le soleil n'éclairera plus sur la terre que des hommes libres, ne reconnaissant d'autre maître que leur raison; où les tyrans et les esclaves, les prêtres et leurs stupides ou hypocrites instruments, n'existeront plus que dans l'histoire et sur les théâtres.' *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (Paris, 1795), 338; *Outlines of an Historical View of the Progress of the Human Mind* (London, 1795), 355.

<sup>4</sup> 'I have found [the answer]!': attributed to Archimedes in Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, *De architectura* 9. 10.

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obtained the answer, must be extremely intoxicating. And these persons, certainly some of them, were undoubtedly under the influence of this very agreeable and beneficent feeling.

Let me now say something about the criticism of these notions, although I have dealt with them in a highly oversimplified fashion, for which I apologise. You must understand that this had not always been fully accepted by everyone. Already, in ancient Greece, certain Sophists had doubted whether universal answers of this kind were possible: ‘Quod semper, quod ubique, quod ab omnibus creditum est’<sup>5</sup> – something which holds for all men, everywhere, at all times. There is the famous Sophist that Aristotle mentions who says, ‘Fire burns both here and in Persia, but social and political customs change under our very eyes.’<sup>6</sup>

Montesquieu had sown certain doubts by saying there were influences of environment and of ‘climate’, as he called it, which were very important; that what was good for men in Persia was not necessarily good for men in France; that different institutions grew in different circumstances; that geography, tradition, various other forces – physical conformation – produced different types of human beings whose needs might be different from one another’s; that total solutions imposed upon all mankind would suit some much better than others, and those whom it did not suit, it would have a Procrustean effect on.

Hume had pointed out that it was not the case that one could obtain certain guaranteed answers about matters of fact through the use of rational methods, no more about that than about moral or political values, or about any kind of answers to normative questions either; that these things were mere matters of empiricism, of probability; that you could not in fact demonstrate or prove the existence of a matter of fact by the kinds of methods which were used in logic or of mathematics. All you could do was to establish certain likelihoods as a result of noticing regularities and the like. Nevertheless even these famous sceptics, who were always regarded (at least by Carl Becker in the case of Hume) as having undermined the very citadel of the Encyclopedia, did not in fact do so. All that follows from Montesquieu is that different means are to be used in different circumstances. Even he did not deny that most men’s ends were approximately the same: all men

<sup>5</sup> Vincent of Lérins, *Commonitorium* 2. 3.

<sup>6</sup> *Nicomachean Ethics* 1134b26 [freely rendered].

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desired to eat and drink; all men desired freedom; all men desired justice; all men desired security and the like. But of course the methods for obtaining security in China were different from those which obtained in Peru, and therefore legislation must be carefully adapted to the particular customs and the particular inclinations, particular physiques, particular moral, intellectual and perhaps religious outlooks of different groups of human beings, in order not to fail in their effect.

Hume merely translated what had been metaphysical truths about values, about what the proper ends of men were, into psychological or sociological terms. Instead of saying that certain goals were for ever given to us by God or by nature, that they could be proved to exist in the way in which the medieval Middle Ages looked upon natural law, he merely said that these values could simply be discovered by looking round at what most people in most places in fact needed, or in fact wanted, by the use of sociological and statistical methods. But neither of these thinkers denied that there was a great uniformity among men; that the goals were exceedingly similar if not identical, and the only problem was how to obtain the means of their satisfaction.

And so you get a situation in which there is a concerted attempt to translate ultimate problems – what we should be, how we should live, what we should do – into technical terms, technological terms. The ends are given. A great many people in the eighteenth century say this, both physiocrats and others. The ends are given, we are what we are, we need what we need, we want what we want. Men are created as they are and they are not very different from one age to another. Their goals are what they are and it is very possible to discover what they are by disinterested objective empirical enquiry, and not by listening to a lot of dogmatic pronouncements on the subject.

Very well. Having discovered what these ends are, the problem then is how to satisfy them, and that science will do for us – that is simply a question of how to arrange things. Condorcet more or less says, if we can study the societies of bees and beavers, why cannot we apply the same methods to human beings?<sup>7</sup> That is to say, find out what they basically want, that without which they

<sup>7</sup> 'Discours prononcé dans l'Académie française le jeudi 21 février 1782, à la réception de M. le marquis de Condorcet', *Oeuvres de Condorcet*, ed. A. Condorcet O'Connor and M. F. Arago (Paris, 1847–9), i 392.

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cannot flourish, that without which they cannot be happy, and try to give it to them by the best means available, namely the application of mathematical and scientific methods to nature. This is how we have done it in the past, this has been a success in the early eighteenth century, and will become a growing success as we continue to apply it.

That is the optimistic doctrine. He did not have guarantees that this would lead inexorably to total human felicity, but at least, if there was to be human felicity, that was the path towards it. And he saw no reason why, after many failures, humanity should not attain to it. That is roughly the programme, and therefore there is a notion here of progress, progress along the only route along which there is accumulation of knowledge. Mathematics – well, we know more than the ancients; physics, chemistry, biology, sociology, psychology – well, we know more than the ancients. There *are* subjects about which we do not know more than the ancients, and these are plainly not scientific, they are not worth bothering about, such as the contemporary state of, let us say, morals, the contemporary state of theology and the like, which are obviously pseudo-disciplines if only for that reason: because in them there is no knowable, rational method and no accumulation of clear, universal, easily perceptible, lucid, well-organised knowledge.

Let me now begin with the criticism of some of these doctrines. There was a good deal of scepticism about this in England one way or another, particularly in the realms of literary criticism and the like, which was a comparatively harmless marginal region; but the central attack – the most violent attack, the most acrid, in some ways the most interesting – was delivered in Germany. Let me say something by way of a very brief historical introduction to what I am about to say. I am no historian, and I stand to be corrected on the hypothesis which I am about to offer you. It may be that what I am saying is either inaccurate or wholly untrue. If so, I hope that, after this lecture, when I shall submit myself to questioning, somebody may put me straight.

It seems to me that the Renaissance, at least the great rise in the arts and sciences which occurred in the rest of Western Europe, did not touch Germany to nearly such an extent. Why this is I do not know, nor do I know of any historian who gives any reason for this. If you travelled across Europe, from Bordeaux to Vienna, in about 1500, I think you would find that the culture of these

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places, the knowledge, the arts were not radically different from one another; they differed, of course, but the level was not all that different. Italy had passed its great time, but was still in a state of marvellous development; France was rising; Germany had Dürer and Grünewald and scholars like Reuchlin. It was in a high state of cultural development.

If you passed that way in about 1600, that is to say before the Thirty Years War, which was usually held to account for relative German backwardness, you would not find this at all. Spain is going through its great Renaissance; France has the Pléiade; the Elizabethan age in England I need not comment on; the Italians are producing, if not the sublime masters of the fifteenth century, at any rate great scientific progress and a very respectable form of visual art as well; music is flourishing in Italy as never before; even Denmark, Sweden are beginning to stir. But if you go to southern Germany, or even as far as the centre of the Empire, even as far as Vienna, the number of persons who are major contributors to culture are very few and far to seek. Even if you think of the seventeenth century, and if I ask you whether you think that the works of Moscherosch are superior or inferior to those of Uz, I do not know that I should expect you to give an immediate answer, unless you belong to the German department of a University. These were the poets of this time. There is Althusius, who was a respectable political thinker; there is, I suppose, Boehme, who is an obscure mystic talking to his friends; there is Kepler, who is a lunatic living in Bohemia and Bavaria and so forth, an astrologer whose work people have become interested in much later. That is about all. Then there are perfectly respectable poets, prose writers, grammarians, and above all, of course, theologians. But the level is very different from the rest of Europe, and so it continues until we get, roughly speaking, to the time of Leibniz and beyond, when there is suddenly a great rise both in literature and above all in music. And this produces a certain sense of provincialism and even humiliation on the part of thinking Germans. The great country is France, which is top of everything. It is militarily and culturally superior to other countries in Europe. It produces scientists, it produces dramatists, it produces painters, it produces poets, it produces soldiers, it produces statesmen – of the first order. It dominates the world. The age of Louis XIV, which so excited Voltaire, was quite obviously a great age. But England, though

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somewhat behind, is not very far behind towards the end of that century and the beginning of the next. Nothing of this can be seen east of the Rhine.

The Germans begin by imitating these models, as always happens in the case of backward countries; and in the end, after a certain amount of feeble imitation, there is a certain resentment about this perpetual attitude of superiority and contempt for German provincials on the part of these grand Western Europeans who appear to have everything, whereas we appear to have nothing. And there is a backlash, which often happens in such cases, and it begins somewhere at the beginning of the eighteenth century, when, under the influence, perhaps, of the religious movement called pietism, there is a sense on the part of these Germans that we cannot be as poor in spirit, we cannot be as contemptible as these persons appear to think us to be. Surely we must have something? And where there is a natural, somewhat profound sense of cultural inferiority, there is as always a feeling of defensive superiority. And the opinion begins to be mooted that no doubt they have the material goods; no doubt they have the army, they have the navy, they have the paintings, they have the sculpture, they have the buildings, they have all these great, glorious magnificent economic and political organisations. But what is all this? What is all this compared with the true values of man, which are his inner life, which are his relations to his fellow human beings and his relations to God? These are the true things, which belong to us and which we understand, and which all these superficial, glittering figures, given over to the vanities of the world, will never grasp. That which we have they cannot take away from us. The tyrant may destroy my home; one of the three hundred German Princes may laud it over us, may be as arbitrary, as unjust, as totally fanatical as you wish. They destroy my house; very well, I care nothing for houses. They destroy my family; I care nothing for my family. What matters is the purity, integrity and impregnability of my inner soul.

This is a kind of retreat in depth – what I have elsewhere called a very sublime form of sour grapes, which was bound to develop in such circumstances. This becomes particularly acute in the backward districts of Germany, in which there is an attempt to reform according to the new progressive principles of the French economy. Frederick the Great, who is a disciple of the French,

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who is disliked by a good many of his subjects for preferring French to German – who imports Frenchmen, who imports Mauvertuis, Voltaire, La Mettrie and others into his Academy – attempts to revive the flagging industries, the flagging crafts, of East Prussia, by importing a great many Frenchmen, or by importing other craftsmen from the West for the purpose of reforming this backward province. And it is in Königsberg that you begin to have the most acute reaction against this kind of manipulation of the good, semi-feudal, deeply religious German citizens by a lot of arrogant, atheistical, smooth foreigners who look down upon us and look down upon our language, who push us about and wish to reform us and wish to stuff us into some kind of foreign frame, destroying our relations, destroying our traditional form of life in the most brutal, the most reckless and the most offensive fashion. And this undoubtedly does create a very sharp reaction: if you read the writers of that period, of about that time, you will find a great deal of bitterness on the subject of these French lackeys imported by Frederick the Great, all these officials who arrange our lives for us. Pietism of course is a branch of Lutheranism, from which sprang Methodism in England, which is concentrated upon the inner life, which rejects ritual and rejects systematic theology in favour of a direct relationship of the soul to God; a direct relationship of the inner life of a human being to eternal values, and above all obedience to and love of spiritual truth.

The man about whom I propose to speak, namely Johann Georg Hamann, was the first secular figure to attack the Enlightenment root and branch. He did it in a very exaggerated fashion; he did it wildly. He had no profession. He started off by being a young journalist, much in love with the Enlightenment, and then he had a spiritual crisis and came back to his ancient pietist faith. But in the end he obtained a small post in the Customs Office of Königsberg and proceeded to pour out a series of writings, obscure, allusive, immensely difficult to read, full of dark anecdotes, of all kinds of references to sources which have been impossible to trace, a long series of writings which I do not recommend anyone here to read, but which nevertheless did have an effect upon their time and their generation, at least in Germany. And his central doctrine was this: they tell us over there, in France, that we must rely on reason, we must rely on experience. Take

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reason first. Reason, as Hume points out – he is writing in the 1760s – is incapable of demonstrating the existence of anything. Hume may have been one of *them*, he may have been a wicked atheist and a friend of Encyclopedists, but he is a Balaam who may have come to curse but has stayed to bless. He is on our side. He has proved that the great metaphysical constructions of the seventeenth century, and some of those of the early eighteenth century too, have nothing in them. You cannot demonstrate the existence of anything by pure use of reason. As Hume rightly pointed out, I should not be able to eat an egg, I should not be able to drink a glass of water, if I did not believe that these objects existed; and my belief is not founded on anything which can be demonstrated in the way in which mathematical propositions can be demonstrated.

Well then: if belief, if faith is what gives me my world, why should not this selfsame faith give me a great many other things as well, for example, the spiritual experience in which I so profoundly believe? What can reason do against that? What can reason do against taste, smell, touch, sight, hearing? These are the only organs which bring the external world to me; these are the only things which are ultimately reliable. And if you turn to experience, what does experience show? Experience does not show a universal man about whom these Frenchmen talk. I do not know who this universal man is, I have never met him. It does not show us Man with a capital M; it shows us men and women of varying kinds who do not seek solely for happiness and the minimisation of pain, which is what the French utilitarians tell us is the basic motive of men – not at all. Men are here to eat, to drink, to love, to hate, to worship, to sacrifice, and above all to live. This is what men are like. If you really open your eyes and look at what humanity is like, you will see that the man of the French Encyclopedists is a useless fiction; that it is an attempt to construct an entirely imaginary being, the Universal Man, who never existed and never could exist. Man is above all a creature who has faculties which cannot be strictly distinguished from each other. It is only metaphysicians, only philosophers, only theorists who proceed to build up a great cobweb of abstract concepts into which they want to slice up and dissect human nature. Reason, imagination, emotion, memory, feeling, these are not different, these interpenetrate each other, they are names for attitudes; sometimes the emphasis is here,

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sometimes the emphasis is there. Fundamentally man is one, and not to be sliced up, not to be dissected into faculties. Indeed there are no such things as faculties: man does everything he does with all his powers, and these powers flow through each other. And if you ask yourself what men do, above all they live by images and by words. These words breed abstract concepts, and these abstract concepts are, as often as not, taken by these philosophers to be real entities, and this is a most terrible form of delusion from which we suffer. There is no such thing as universal man; there is no such thing as universal mind; there is no such thing as reason; there is no such thing, taken abstractly, as this virtue, or that virtue, happiness, pleasure, there are only highly specific forms of it. Every human group has its own language and its own way of feeling, its own way of thinking, its own way of expressing itself, its own way of creating its images. And they live in the stream of tradition which they inherit, they are not born afresh at every moment. You cannot slough off, as the French pretend, this huge accumulation of the past which enters your veins, which is part of your very essence, in terms of which you think, in terms of which you feel, in terms of which you create your works of art, in terms of which you worship, in terms of which you sacrifice, in terms of which your whole life is lived. In other words, it is a tremendous sermon in favour of the inner spiritual life as against the material or physical life.

All truth is particular. Reason is impotent to demonstrate the existence of anything at all; all it can do is to classify. Let me quote from Hamann: 'Every court, every school, every profession, [...] every sect has its own language', which we can comprehend only by the passion of 'a friend, an intimate, a lover',<sup>8</sup> not by rules which are master keys which open no particular door. This is the fundamental sermon. And he goes on to say that since we think in words, and since these words encapsulate the accumulated experience of the society to which we belong, the idea of cleaning up this language – for example the idea of a universal language which begins to be mooted in France – in order to get rid of all the obscurities and all the distortions which language is supposed to have bred – the idea of getting rid of this language is simply getting rid of the only instruments with which we can express ourselves,

<sup>8</sup> Johann Georg Hamann, *Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Joseph Nadler (Vienna, 1949–57), ii 172, line 21, 171, line 15.

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because they embody our feelings, they embody our peculiar way of seeing the universe, they embody the particular vision by which this human group lives. The French Voltaire knows nothing, he says, about that by which men live. Men do not live by pursuit of pleasure, men do not live by reading books, men do not live by the various avocations – by chemistry and by physics. Men live by personal relationships, and that is what matters most of all. And about this the French Encyclopedists simply got experience wrong. There is, for example, a very typical little booklet by him, which shows the sort of man he was and the sort of thing he did. The booklet is called *Defence of the Letter H*. It is written *by* the letter H, and it is written against a lot of liberal clergymen in Berlin who want to introduce linguistic reform. One of the spelling reforms they want to introduce is to eliminate the letter H from words where it plays no part, where it is merely a nuisance, such as the letter H in German words after certain consonants, or at the ends of words and so on, where the letter is simply unnecessary. And Hamann says, yes, yes, this is very sensible, very reasonable, very rational, all that, and after all, what is H? Nothing. Just a breath, just a tiny breath, nothing at all, inconsiderable, completely negligible. But! but! – and then it begins. But – the appearance of the letter H in certain words has etymological roots. It takes us back to our past. It shows us the formation of the language which our fathers spoke. And if we tolerate each of these formations we shall see that the universe which they saw was in some way shaped and determined by their particular symbolism, their particular words, their particular use of expressions. Yes, irregular; certainly difficult; sometimes irrational – but that is how they felt, and if they had not felt this, we should not feel this now, and if we are to understand them, we must understand all the convolutions, all the crookedness, all the peculiar complicated meandering lines which this kind of experience inevitably conveys.

If you read the Bible, you will there find that there are real characters – Abraham is real, Moses is real, these are three-dimensional characters who lived, and with whom we can have some kind of human relationship. We cannot have it towards the man of Voltaire; we cannot have it towards the formulae, the generalisations, the scientific apparatus of the French Encyclopedists. It may be that they are very good on science: it may be that they provide us with a better material form of living,

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that I should not deny. It may be that they are able to predict all kinds of phenomena in the external world, but the external world is not everything. And if there are going to be efforts to reform us in accordance with the principles which these men use for the external world, they will crush, they will maim, they will destroy, they will simply rob us of our essence, which is incorporated in what we have received from others in the peculiar, in the unique, in the special, in the local.

This doctrine then of course gets transferred to Herder, to Möser, to Burke in England, and to many other thinkers. But Hamann is the first person to make this passionate attack. And he says: Men who believe in general propositions, men who believe in rules and formulae only, men who want to tidy things up and have a spick and span world are ultimately men who create bureaucracies, ultimately men who create tidiness, order in human affairs, ultimately destroy the individual, ultimately look on human beings as so many ciphers and so many figures in some kind of general calculation, and ignore everything which is living, everything which is real, everything which is human, everything which is responsive, the human soul itself. And this is a worse form of tyranny, in some ways, than even the dreadful horrors from which they want to save us. And therefore beware: beware of *les grands décisionnaires*, as Montesquieu calls them, people who make the great decisions; of people who apply too many general propositions drawn from the alien sphere of the external world to the palpitating sphere of the human world, where everything is different, where you can understand what human beings are, what human beings want, what human beings have been, how human beings have grown, the dark alleys through which the human race has grown to be what it is in this particular place, here in Königsberg, there in Lyon, wherever it may be – you can discover that, as he says, only by love, by some kind of empathy: by hatred, by love, by human feelings. Those are the only things that we can trust. The great theorists in their offices know nothing of this and simply want to box us in and place us on various shelves on which no human beings could, properly speaking, breathe. That is the sermon.

The sermon is directed against Frederick the Great. There is an essay called ‘The Solomon of Prussia’ which is directed against Frederick the Great, in which he is denounced, in very polite and

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rather cautious language to avoid too much censorship and too much persecution – Hamann was a Prussian citizen – for this kind of spick-and-spanness, for ordering people’s lives about, for trampling on their ancient institutions. And of course East Prussia was, as I say, a semi-feudal establishment, deeply religious, where the incursion of French order and arrangements, of the new rationalisation and modernisation which Frederick the Great was so brilliant at creating hurt most deeply.

So much for Hamann. Hamann’s doctrines about the unique and the particular were passed on to his disciple Herder, who was a much more lucid and a much more famous writer. In Herder’s case this took on a much more systematic form, though he is not by any means particularly systematic. Herder’s point is that what the French say about men being identical – there is a fundamental human substance, the essence being identical as the essence of a stone or an animal is identical – is not true. There is not such a thing as the central core of a human being as there is a central core of, let us say, some object studied by zoologists or botanists or mineralogists: different men, different societies, different outlooks, different languages, each on its own. If you study the Bible and understand that these are really the expressions of Judaeen shepherds wandering about in the hills, you will then understand the Bible, because you must cast yourselves into what it must have been like to have been nomads of this kind, as they were in the Bible. And this is quite different from the world of the Greeks, the world of the Greek *polis* and the world of Plato or of Aristotle or of Pericles or of Aeschylus. And this again is totally different from the world of the Norse sagas of the Skalds. He underwent a journey to England during which his ship was storm-tossed off the shores of Sweden, and he says: When you see these grim men trying to battle against the elements, and the ship practically foundering under these vast, cold waves which wash them, then perhaps you will have a better understanding of the rhythm and the power and the force of these ancient Norse hymns, of these tremendous sagas, which express a form of life and an ideal and a view of nature which is fundamentally different from that of the early Germans, the ancient Greeks, the ancient Hebrews, the French or anybody else. So far from there being a line of progress by which men start as primitive savages and barbarians and gradually climb through Athens, through Rome, through Florence

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and Paris to the heights of Voltaire's France – which is roughly speaking the sermon at least of the proudest and most self-laudatory among the Encyclopedists, among the *philosophes* – so far from that, you will find that each of these cultures is of equal value. Greek society is neither inferior nor superior to ours; it is simply different. If you are to understand Homer, it certainly will not do to regard Homer simply as a rudimentary version of Racine; it will not do to regard Shakespeare and Milton as rather less successful examples of that of which Addison is a more successful example, which is virtually what Voltaire says.

This of course is a commonplace now, but it was not in the 1770s, when it was originally stated. If you are to understand a culture, you must understand the symbolism through which it expresses itself. Men do not all believe the same thing; men do not have identical ideals, to which some of them attain better than others; men do not create works of art which are equally to be appreciated at all times. It is not the case that it is simply a misfortune that priests and not philosophers happened to be at the cradle of mankind, as Polybius said, otherwise mankind might have been spared all these awful horrors of religious persecution and the Inquisition. Men are what they are and they go through phases; and different men in different circumstances live different lives, have different ideals, and each culture has its own centre of gravity, its own *Schwerpunkt*, as he calls it. Unless you understand what a centre of gravity is, you will not understand these men at all. The idea of translating one into the other is impossible. Hamann had already said that translation is, in principle, not possible. Every child speaks with its own native intrinsic symbolism. You can translate the similarities, but the differences remain untranslated. Somebody once defined poetry as what is lost in translation. This is roughly what people like Herder and Hamann believed in – that is to say, the uniqueness of each separate culture.

Now if this is so, then all kinds of things follow which are certainly not compatible with the central beliefs of the Enlightenment. For example: it follows that the notion that there are true answers to all serious questions, which only wait to be discovered, and then put together for the purpose of solving the jigsaw puzzle, cannot be right, because the Greek answer to how to live is different from the Roman answer, and the Roman answer

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from the Indian answer, and the Indian answer from the German answer, from the Italian answer, and from the Norse answer. And these answers are of equal validity, they each suit the particular group of human beings who all answer the demands of life in their own way – and whom these answers alter: there is a perpetual self-alteration on the part of men. The idea of static ideals which remain unaltered by the fact that human beings themselves change is obviously an absurdity. Now if it is the case that there is not a single answerable question here – how to live – that the answer will differ not merely in accordance with place, as Montesquieu thought; not merely with regard to the kinds of needs which will make one group of men happier rather than another group of men; if the answer differs because the very ideals of these communities are themselves different, whatever the causes may be – if that is so, then the notion of a single overarching answer towards which science will lead us if only we allow ourselves to be rational, and to be careful in our observations, cannot be true, because some of these ideals are not compatible with one another.

Herder was a benevolent thinker, an optimistic thinker, and did not see why these various different answers should not live peacefully side by side. In the garden, as Mao said, there are many flowers,<sup>9</sup> and there is no reason why these various flowers should not peacefully grow side by side, even though their species and their colours and their general attributes are quite different from each other. Well, be that as it may, it of course sows the seeds of a certain cultural nationalism, where you say that what matters is the language, what matters is the soil – and he says that. A man can develop only among people who use words as he uses them, by whom he is understood. If you take a German and make him emigrate to, let us say, America, to join the British troops they are fighting, he will be consumed with the most acute nostalgia; and nostalgia, the desire to return to his own country – the most noble

<sup>9</sup> 'Letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the arts and the sciences and a flourishing socialist culture in our land.' Mao Zedong, 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People', speech to the 11th Session of the Supreme State Conference, Beijing, 27 February 1957: *Selected Works of Mao Tse-Tung* (Oxford etc., 1967–77) v 408. 'Let a hundred flowers blossom' and 'Let a hundred schools of thought contend' are Chinese proverbs.

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of all pains, as he calls it – is quite incurable. He cannot develop among people who do not understand what he says. They will understand his prose, but they will not understand the inner movements of his heart. If you take Icelanders and send them to Denmark, they wither. If you take Italians and send them to England, they wither; and they wither because men can develop properly only among people who have certain characteristics which are impalpable, which these people take for granted, which create the atmosphere in which alone this plant can properly grow. He is the first person to develop this doctrine to its fullest extent. Of course, afterwards it becomes, as I say, a commonplace.

And the notion is this: the whole Encyclopedist notion that fundamentally men are similar, that what the Portuguese want, and the Chinese want, and the Italians want is much the same, although they use different means to get it – no, no, says Herder. The way in which the Portuguese draws up his laws, the way in which he sings his songs, the way in which he dances, the way in which he gets up and sits down, the way in which he eats and drinks, the kind of person he marries, the kind of religion which he professes all have a certain gestalt quality, all have a certain pattern quality, which is Portugueseness, which has more in common than the way in which the Portuguese legislate has with the way in which the Chinese do. There are certain similarities, because they are all men, of course; there are certain similarities because all men need to eat, they need to drink, they need shelter, they need certain basic things, but these basic things are not enough. There is such a thing as a pervasive cultural pattern which unites all kinds of different activities on the part of people who are members of that culture. There is no question of race here. He does not talk about blood, but he does talk about language, symbolism and soil. And that is why you must not lift people from their soil, that is why you must not exile them, and that is why you must not rob them of their language.

Hence his tremendous sermon against various forms of imperialism. Here are the Romans, who crush the native cultures of Asia, and do not know what they have crushed; whereas all these little nations of Asia, the Cappadocians, the Mysians, the Phrygians, heaven knows who, *might* have developed all kinds of exquisite cultures of their own if it were not for this enormous Roman jackboot. So with the British in India, bringing to the

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Indians a lot of Western Christianity unintelligible to these people. It is rather peculiar that the chief clergyman of Weimar, which is what Herder theoretically was, protests against missionaries' activity in India because they trample on ancient Indian religious values. But he does. Similarly with everything else of that kind. Any form of imperialism, any form of flattening out, any form of destroying the natural life of peoples in the name of some overarching general principle impoverishes, maims, destroys, creates a desert where there were blooming flowers before. That is the central sermon.

That is one form of criticism of the Enlightenment; that is why Herder thinks that Voltaire, Helvétius, all these men do not understand what men are. They appeal to experience, but the experience to which they appeal has already been processed by all kinds of philosophical and scientific generalisations which have denuded them of their peculiar colour, of their particularity, of their applicability to specific human circumstances everywhere.

There are two other persons whom I wish to mention, who delivered an attack from a somewhat different quarter. Of all people, the philosopher Kant, who was certainly a child of the Enlightenment, who certainly believed in the triumph of science – and indeed the *Critique of Pure Reason* is a great attempt to explain the principles upon which the natural sciences stand – no man believed in reason more strongly; no man believed more in order, no man believed more in coherent, lucid and systematic thought. When it came, however, to the subject of morals, as everyone here probably knows, Kant believed that the only act of merit which human beings could perform is the act which they perform freely; that is, acts which they need not have performed, but determined themselves to perform. And therefore he believed that the notions of right and wrong applied only to those acts which men did themselves, where they acted freely and were not acted upon. Now Helvétius, when he writes about the reorganisation of the horrible human society from which he came, of the awful France of corruption, privilege and injustice which he is trying to remedy, says it is no good preaching to people, because we have preached for two thousand years and it has made no difference. The only thing to do is to legislate. What we shall do is to organise a great series of rewards and punishments so that people who do what is wrong will, as it were, get an electric shock – though he did not of

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course use that expression – anyhow, will be punished; whereas people who do what is right will automatically be rewarded. ‘I do not care’, he says, ‘whether men be virtuous or vicious, I want them only to be intelligent’;<sup>10</sup> and if they are intelligent they will simply do what is good because I shall dangle a carrot, and they will avoid what is bad because I shall use a stick. This is how society must be reformed. They must be conditioned into socially productive activity; their children still must be conditioned; their grandchildren will have it in their blood – their grandchildren will already do it more or less semi-automatically. In this way a peaceful, harmonious and rational society can be created.

This for Kant is absolute blasphemy. The idea of compelling people, the idea of conditioning people, the idea of educating people by forcible means, by herding them, using them, conditioning them like animals into performing certain kinds of acts this appeared to him to be an attempt against the inborn dignity and freedom of man. In his work ‘Über den Gemeinspruch: Das mag in der Theorie richtig sein, taugt aber nicht für die Praxis’ – ‘On the Old Saying: That May Be Right in Theory, But it Won’t Work in Practice’ – he says that nothing is more terrible than paternalism.<sup>11</sup> There are a great many vices which Kant disliked much more, perhaps; no doubt he did not like cruelty, he did not like mendacity; there are all kinds of things Kant was no doubt against. But his most savage attack is against wise paternalism, by which the ruler manages to herd his people like sheep into the right kind of meadow, because that means treating them like children, like people who are not responsible for their acts; he is depriving them of their freedom, their freedom to be vicious if necessary. Better to go to the bad freely than to have to go to the good because of some kind of compulsion exercised upon you, either by educators, legislators, or by your emotions, which you are unable to control. Hence this terrific passion for the idea of the free will in Kant, almost a paranoiac fear that one might be conditioned by factors which prevent the free exercise of at least minimal choice. And his attitude to nature is wildly different from that of the Encyclopedists. For the Encyclopedists, for Hume, for Rousseau, equally for the others, nature is a great

<sup>10</sup> ‘Peu importe que les hommes soient vicieux; c’en est assez s’ils sont éclairés.’ *De l’homme* 9. 6.

<sup>11</sup> *Kant’s gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin, 1900– ) viii 290–1.

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system, either organic or mechanical, whichever way you like to look at it, which operates in some ideal fashion – by cause and effect, or by organic development according to Maupertuis, or whatever it might be. Men are unhappy only when they fall out of harmony with nature, and the important thing is to adjust oneself, to re-enter into healthy relations with nature, towards which men's whole being incites them, and not listen to the wicked words of wicked men or silly remarks of stupid men. For Kant this will not do at all. Nature is the sphere of causality, that is, a treadmill.<sup>12</sup> If men are objects in nature, goodbye to morality, men cannot possibly be men; men in this regard must not be equated with animals or things. Nature for him is not kind nature, not Mistress Nature, not Dame Nature, which it is for the thinkers of the eighteenth century. Nature is at best simply a slagheap, just a lot of neutral matter upon which we impose our free will, and create as we want to create, or in accordance with principles – rational principles to which we commit ourselves. Alternatively, nature is perhaps even a hostile element which resists us, which wants to reduce us to mere causal sequences, which wants to beat us into natural pulp, and to make us equal with animals and plants, and therefore must on all accounts be resisted. As for the talk about self-determination, no good, he says. To talk about a clock which, because it goes round, appears to itself to be running itself is a mere illusion: self-determination, the idea that our character dominates us, although we have not made our character because that has been made by external forces, is a 'miserable subterfuge'.<sup>13</sup>

Now Kant, in short, as I say, was addicted to reason; he hated sentimentality and romanticism, *Schwärmerei*, almost more than anyone. Nevertheless this constant emphasis on autonomy, as he called it, on self-direction, on being able to choose freely outside the causal treadmill, then communicated itself to certain German Romantic philosophers, who vastly exaggerated it. In Fichte you will find these constant references to the fact that the self is free, values are not imposed upon me from outside, I create them myself. Here you begin getting the Romantic doctrine which is athwart the whole of the rationalism and empiricism of the eighteenth century, which is to say, what I do is something which I

<sup>12</sup> [Kant describes man as a 'turnspit' in the *Critique of Practical Reason: Kant's gesammelte Schriften* (previous note), v 97, line 19.]

<sup>13</sup> 'Elender Behelf': *ibid.* 96, line 15.

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invent myself. It is not true that there are objective values like stars in the heavens which I discover by some kind of quasi-scientific means. Like a painter, before I have painted my picture, it is not there at all. Reynolds was wrong in supposing that there are Platonic archetypes which I simply copy. Before I have danced, there is no dance; before I have walked, there is no walk; before I have performed the moral act, there never was a principle. The principle is a principle which I myself invent for myself. Of course, much depends upon how you define the self. Some define the self empirically, as, for example, Romantics like, let us say, Byron or Carlyle did, and some identify the self as the nation, the class, the culture, history, whatever it might be. But in all these cases the notion is: No act is worth performing unless it is freely chosen; if it is freely chosen, it is not part of causal nature; if it is not part of causal nature, science cannot deal with it. And this is not compatible with the doctrine of man as an intrinsic part of nature, as taught by virtually every thinker in the eighteenth century.

Let me end with the most violent attack of all on the Enlightenment – that is, after the French Revolution. The French Revolution was built upon the principles of the Enlightenment, and they went wrong: it was not the rule of wise experts; it was not the rule of honourable scientists seeking to determine themselves in terms of reason. The French Revolution brought forward the notions of the Terror, uncontrolled mobs, charisma, dictators – the very opposite of that which these people preached. If there were scientists of genius like Lavoisier, they put them to death; if there were thinkers of great nobility like Condorcet, they forced them to die also; and therefore there was a great question, always: What went wrong? Why did the French Revolution, which started so nobly, inspired by so many high-minded persons and so many careful, scrupulous scientific thinkers, why did it end in this great bloodbath, and in Napoleon?

Well, there are many answers, such as the fact that the revolutionaries, the thinkers, had not taken enough account of economic factors or of religious factors, or of this or that factor. The reactionary thinker Joseph de Maistre, who was a Savoyard, whose country was conquered by the French and who therefore crossed over to the Whites, so to speak, simply takes the Encyclopedists at their word and says: They say we must be empirical; they say we must watch man as he truly is in nature.

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Nature: very well, he says, let us look at nature. What do we find? They speak of a harmonious nature, Dame Nature, Mistress Nature, this exquisite lady in Hume who, when you are out of sorts, gradually brings you back to yourself. I do not see this, says Maistre. I study nature in books on zoology, and what I find nature to be is a huge bloody field of slaughter in which animals destroy each other and man destroys himself. That is what I find. I find man to be aggressive, and I find man to be ignorant, and I find man to be irrational. The idea of controlling man by rational institutions invented by theoretical thinkers is simply not on. Take, he says, the institutions of mankind. Take, for example, the institution of marriage: is that rational? Why should I suppose that life with one lady to whom I plight my troth is going to make me happy for the rest of my life? A most improbable idea. Nevertheless, free love, wherever it is applied, collapses. Marriage has lasted for a very long time. Take the institution of monarchy. Nothing is less rational than to suppose that, even if the King is good and wise, his son, grandson, great-grandson will also be good and wise. A great many of them have been stupid, vicious and wicked. Yet the number of republics has not been great and the number of monarchies, very. The Polish *liberum veto*, which is perhaps the most rational political institution ever invented, collapsed ignominiously not so very long ago.

He then says: What do these gentlemen wish us to see? They wish to study what mankind is actually like. Well, I am doing so, and let me inform you that what I see is this: I see that man is by nature irrational and aggressive. Small reforms, they resist. If Peter the Great wants to shave the beards of the Boyars, some of them resist to the death. If somebody wants to reform the calendar (as happened in the middle of the eighteenth century), people will organise riots on the streets because they think that certain days are being stolen from their lives. But when men are sent to fight with each other – innocent men – to fight, to shed innocent blood of equally innocent men on the other side, then they do not mutiny. Nothing suits men better than to be invited to immolate themselves upon some ridiculous altar. Then they throw themselves with enthusiasm upon each other, and march and conquer and kill and slaughter without the slightest reason for knowing why they are doing so. That is what man is really like. If that is what man is like, it is no use applying rational schemas to

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him. The best we can do is to try to control him, the best we can do is to prevent him from destroying his fellow men. Original sin is not to be denied. Rousseau says: How is it that man, who is born free, is nevertheless everywhere in chains? That, says Maistre, is rather as if you were to say: Why is it that sheep, who are born carnivorous, nevertheless everywhere nibble grass?<sup>14</sup> We must observe men as they are, and not as we think and imagine them to be.

As for language: how did language grow? M. Condillac, who can answer all questions, can answer this question too. The first generation of men said 'ba' and the second generation of men said 'be'. The Assyrians invented the nominative and the Medes invented the genitive.<sup>15</sup> Is that how it happened? All this mockery is intended to show that institutions grow imperceptibly. Much of it is simply rhetorical exaggeration, and half of the faults which he attributes to the Encyclopedists, the Encyclopedists are completely innocent of. The main value of all these criticisms is to show that the men whom the Encyclopedists talked about were a good deal more complex, and the issues were much more tangled, that the whole of the appalling 'hell journey',<sup>16</sup> as Hamann calls it, of self-understanding is fraught with a great many more difficulties than had been supposed in the palmy and optimistic days of the simpler minds among the progressive Encyclopedists. And this has entered the nineteenth century very deeply. Among Maistre's pupils you will find a great many thinkers; you will find Kierkegaard, you will find Dostoevsky, you will find Nietzsche, you will find all these thinkers who, one-sided, savagely irrational and sometimes almost mad as they may be, nevertheless see things which others have not seen. That is what Hamann originally said. If you want the truth, do not confine yourself to the conventional men who look at everything through nicely polished spectacles. It is the irregulars, vagabonds, outsiders – persons afflicted with all kinds of slight dottinesses, people who squint at reality and do not look it straight in the eye – who sometimes see things which all these gifted, well-ordered, intelligent, wise, academically trained people do not see.

<sup>14</sup> This is in fact a remark on Maistre by Émile Faguet, *Politiques et moralistes du dix-neuvième siècle*, 1st series (Paris, 1899), 41.

<sup>15</sup> *Oeuvres complètes de J. de Maistre* (Lyon, 1884–7), iv 88.

<sup>16</sup> 'Höllenfahrt': op. cit. (p. 14 above, note 6), ii 164, line 17.

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That is about as much as is left of the heritage of these thinkers, but perhaps, in its own way, it is enough.

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Posted 24 March 2014

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