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TWO ENEMIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

2 The First Onslaught

J. G. Hamann and his Disciples

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TWO ENEMIES OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT

2 The First Onslaught: J. G. Hamann and his Disciples

This is a lightly edited transcript of a recording in Isaiah Berlin's papers. This was the second of the four Woodbridge Lectures, 'Two Enemies of the Enlightenment' (Hamann and Maistre), delivered on 25–8 October 1965 at the Harkness Theater, Columbia University. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars. For the abbreviations used in the footnotes see TCE.

I SPOKE LAST TIME about Hamann's anti-rationalism. Let me continue with the exposition of his views, so as to give you a more complete picture than I was able to do last time.

The word 'reason' itself profoundly irritated and annoyed him: whenever he sees it he strikes. Bayle made the famous statement, which is the battle-cry of the entire Enlightenment, 'Reason is the supreme tribunal, and one which judges in the last resort, and without appeal, everything that is placed before it.' This comes from the famous essay on the comet. Hamann quotes this and says, 'What is this reason, with its universality, infallibility, exuberant certainty and obviousness? An *ens rationis*, a stuffed dummy which the howling superstition of our unreason endows with divine attributes.' Well, this is a very typical way of speaking – for him, that is to say. What he wishes to say is that any form of reification, any form of the erection of any category as a general criterion for any purpose always distorts and caricatures. As I tried to say last time, he is the first of the thinkers, at least I think he is the first and – it's always rather dangerous to say this, but he is at least amongst the first of thinkers who start the entire tradition of saying: Any smoothing out, any generalisation is a caricature of the living tissue of life; death cannot copy life; rest cannot copy movement; words cannot copy reality; and so forth. And whenever the word 'reason' comes up in the writings of anyone else he sees before him a dead framework, an icy construction which appears to him to imprison and to kill the flowing chaos of life which he sees before him. To resist emotion with logical distinctions is to try to stop the ocean wave with a barrier of sand. Mathematics have never yet curbed passion or done anything to resist or restrain human prejudice. And he quotes Hume again. The points I wish to make – there are three points – in order

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to condense this man's extremely chaotic and often wildly irrelevant thought into what appear to me to be the central propositions, at least of historical importance – let me say this.

The first proposition which I wish to impute to him is that he genuinely was a nominalist and an empiricist. Whenever he saw rationalism before him in any shape or form he attacked immediately. The second proposition is about the unity of the spirit and the flesh; the third proposition is about the nature of language. He pictures the history of philosophy as a dead museum of forgotten antiquities in which it is necessary to infuse the breath of life in order to make them live; and when you come to the history of philosophy what you mainly find there, according to him, are various forms of repression, various forms of frameworks, networks of categories, constructions of the reason, with which human beings try to shield and protect themselves against perception of reality. The true image, he says, of the average man, the sane, sensible or rational man, is that of a sleepwalker, 'a man who with infinite sagacity, reflection, coherence, talks, acts, executes perilous enterprises, and does this with greater assurance of touch than he would – or could – do it if his eyes were even a little open.'¹

This is a paradox which almost every other Romantic author afterwards echoes. The notion is that sensible men and even sensible philosophers manage to lull themselves into some rigid view of life, construct some highly artificial schema by which they imprison themselves, go to sleep on a comfortable bed of an accepted and unquestioned dogma, and thenceforward, having dedicated themselves to some single *idée maîtresse*, to some single framework or some single so-called coherent view of life, proceed then to ignore everything which is exceptional, everything that is real, everything that is palpitating, everything which contradicts, all the wrinkles, all the chaos, all the irregularities of life, which to Hamann is in fact reality. And he says: 'Four things I have never understood: the man who seeks the philosophers' stone; the man who wishes to square the circle; the man who wishes to measure the sea; and the man who believes that a man of genius ought to possess common sense.'² And

¹ B i 369.31 [very loose].

² [More literally: 'Three things [...] I cannot comprehend, possibly four: a *man of sound judgement* who looks for the philosophers' stone; the squaring of a circle; the extent of the sea; and a *man of genius* who *affects the religion of sound human reason*.' W ii 294.6.]

as he was convinced that he himself was a man of genius, and compared himself to Socrates in this respect, not altogether modestly, his life was to a large degree devoted to constantly, wherever he saw it, to constantly refuting this constant tendency towards the imprisonment of reality in some categorial scheme. He says: There are two types of idolatry to which human beings are addicted. One he calls rational mysticism, the other he calls scientific mysticism. Rational mysticism, which is a curious name for it, is for example the Eleusinian mysteries. The Eleusinian mysteries is an attempt to create the illusion on people's part that there is another world to which they can be admitted by incantations, by religious exercises, by mysterious operations by which they escape from the chaos and the unsatisfactoriness of this world into some coherent, luminous divine world in which virtue is rewarded, crime is punished and otherwise order occurs, which compensates them for the dissatisfactions and the irregularities of this world.

This is a form of ancient idolatry. Modern idolatry, he says, is a much paler and much more – even foolish, a far less vivid version of this same thing, and that is created by the scientists of Paris. There is a religion of science and a religion of Eleusis: both these are forms of idolatry, both these are an attempt to erect a dualism by which the world here below is ignored in favour of some imaginary world thereabove or therebehind or therebelow. Any form of dualism of this sort appears to him to be an offence against reality. Anything which is ordered, anything which is finite, he seeks to reject. I think it was Spinoza who said: Nature – the purpose of nature is uniformity. There is nothing that Hamann believed less. He liked only diversity, he liked only infinity; anything which appeared to him to be finite or tend toward the finite, any ambition to try to lock anything up within a coherent schema appeared to him a form of shallowness and foolishness. That is why – he tells the story himself, how, sitting in the garden of the English merchant Green, who was a great friend of Immanuel Kant – sitting in this garden, Kant said, 'I think' – not perhaps one of the wisest remarks which Kant made, as you will see – 'I think that astronomy has finally come to an end, I think everything is known, I do not think new knowledge can now occur.' If Kant did say that, as I say, it was not perhaps the most gifted remark which Kant ever issued.

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Hamann said, ‘When he said this, I could strangle him.’³ His reason was – Hamann’s interest in astronomy was not superabundant; he was not interested in natural sciences, as we know; on the contrary, he regarded the whole myth of the natural sciences as *Lebensfeindlich* – inimical to life. Nevertheless the very idea that something is finished, that God could not create new stars, new planets, that enormous exceptions could not arise, that some enormous outburst of chaotic creative imagination on the part of an unpredictable creator could not occur, that Kant or any other scientist was able with what appeared to him to be smug satisfaction to say, that’s that, we’ve done the job, astronomy is at an end, now we get on to the next task, whatever it is, the next set of problems in the natural sciences, appeared to him to be the most profound misunderstanding and the most limitless arrogance of which contemptible human beings were capable. This is the temper in which he speaks. Similarly whenever he finds any generalisations, whenever he finds Kant talking about categories – about, for example, causality, we already know what he thinks – but when he finds Kant talking about Time and Space with capital letters as forms of the intuition, he says: Time is to me pulse beats, time is to me heartbeats, the rhythms of nature, concretely, here; there is no such thing as Time, he says, with a capital T, there is only this particular piece of duration, there is this particular experience which is ungeneralisable because sufficiently dissimilar to other similar experiences for any general proposition about time not to be of great significance. Similarly space is what I feel when I gesture; space is what I feel when I make a piece of sculpture; space occurs when I try to mimic the walk of an animal, a form of gait for example. As for this three-dimensional space for which Newton speaks, the box of which Newton and Kant speak, that is a typical fiction of reason which again imprisons and limits the imagination of man.

Well, the philosophical value of this is not very clear, but at any rate it is a symptom of the way in which Hamann’s thought and imagination worked. Anything which represses was inimical to him, even Rousseau, for whom he has some respect – he regards, he looks on Rousseau, and he says he looks on Rousseau, very much

³ B ii 416.29 ff. [See also Blum pp. 283-4, of which this is a garbled version: it was the hypotheses Hamann wanted to strangle (or just ‘kill’?), not Kant; this needs sorting out.]

as Socrates looked on Protagoras, as the best of the sophists, but still a sophist. And he is the best of the sophists, just as Protagoras was for Socrates, because Protagoras understood something about the moral nature of man, though he did not understand it, perhaps, in the way in which Socrates wished it understood. Rousseau is an excellent defence against the shallow generalisations of Helvétius or Holbach; he understands the human emotions, he understands the darker side of human nature which is completely opaque to the, for Hamann at least, dry unimaginative schematising dryasdusts who work in Paris, or for that matter in England too.

But Rousseau is mistaken because for one yoke he simply substitutes another: for the yoke of sociology, psychology, some kind of science of man, of human science or social science which is constructed on the analogy of mathematics or of natural science, which kills everything, smooths and irons everything out, he substitutes the simple man, the open heart, innocence which nevertheless is also able to perceive general laws, huge timeless propositions, which all good men at any period, at any time and in any place, could see if only they weren't corrupted by their own *amour propre* or by the devastating or crippling effect upon them of institutions which perhaps they were not able to help being born into; and this seems to him to be ultimately a deep fallacy. And that is why he attacks the *Nouvelle Héloïse*: he likes the *Nouvelle Héloïse* as a novel because it appears to him to some degree to show some perception of the Romantic, that is to say the emotional, nature of man, the miseries – it is in some ways a description of a specific psychological tragedy, of the pains and agonies of a particular human being in a particular concrete situation – and not to generalise too much. Nevertheless he says: There is absolutely no reason in the world why the heroine, why Julie, should in the end not go off with Saint-Preux. Why should she remain with her dreary boring husband Wollmar just because he is virtuous and just because he understands nature, and understands the nature of the world? He understands nothing of the kind, he says. The morality of Rousseau, which is ultimately the conventional morality of Protestantism, for Hamann, is simply the imposition once again of fearful thongs, fearful conventional framework upon the wild beatings of the human heart; and therefore his criticism of this novel is that in the end Rousseau surrendered; in the end there is the gloomy trio of

Wollmar, Julie and Saint-Preux; Saint-Preux is unable to marry Julie because she is already married to Wollmar; marriage is sacred.

Why should marriage be sacred? says Hamann. This needs some reasoning; and he himself never did marry the lady with whom he lived. This caused a certain amount of shock in pietist circles; nevertheless his general piety was so great, and the general holiness of his life was regarded as so exceptional, that he was not very much attacked on that score. But the general attitude of Hamann in this respect is that it is we human beings who impose barriers between the various aspects of human nature, between the reason and the imagination, between the imagination and sense, between sense and understanding – all these categories with which he thinks Kant plays so idly, into which he hacks and cuts the living flesh of reality. All this does incredible damage in life itself. And one of the most powerful sermons to be obtained in Hamann is about the identification of the spirit and the flesh, that they are one, and that the ascetic cutting off of the spirit from the flesh, whether it is done by people who believe in the Eleusinian mysteries, or whether it is done by ascetics who follow either Jansenists or German pietists, whoever it might be, is a crime against the complete nature of man.

Let me read you some characteristic quotations to illustrate this point. The greatest crime, death in life, is to divorce the intellect from ‘the deepest abysses of the most tangible sensuousness’.⁴ ‘Let there be light!’⁵ This is an act of creation, sensuous drawing and creation. God himself is made flesh. If God had not been made flesh he could not discourse to us, who are also flesh; but we, blasphemously, have divided the spirit from the flesh. Gather the fragments together: that is the work, in literature, of a scholar; in thought, of a philosopher; but to imitate them, to shape them and to live them, that is the work of a poet;⁶ and the poet is the highest manifestation, for Hamann, of man. Reason is a poisonous snake, the arch-heretic, the great enemy of God and his truth,⁷ the snake in Paradise. To divide the flesh from the spirit is blasphemy against God, who made us one. We must take Christ’s words literally and seek to restore within ourselves a child’s view of life, and a child’s

⁴ W iii 287.31.

⁵ W ii 197.26.

⁶ W ii 198.34.

⁷ ‘Christianus Democritus’ (Konrad Dippel), *Christen-Statt auff Erden ohne gewöhnlichen Lehr- Webr- und Nebr-Stand* [...] (n.p., 1700), 18, 78–9, 111.

view of life mainly includes a natural, unashamed sense of the flesh. To tame the passions is to weaken spontaneity and genius.

This was a fairly commonplace sentiment for the eighteenth century, and Diderot would have subscribed to it, the Swiss aestheticians would have subscribed to it, but Hamann meant it in a much more passionate and much more direct sense. Our philosophers hide with shame, like Adam, their unavoidable and agreeable sin;⁸ as man was made in God's image, so is the body a picture of the soul. Modern writers, he says, have turned the savage violence of the Beasts of the Apocalypse into Lessing's harmless moral imagery; they have turned Aesop's ferocious vision into the smooth elegance of Horace. To understand truly one must descend to the depths of the orgies of Bacchus and Ceres.⁹ Newton's, Buffon's and Nieuwentyt's discoveries cannot inspire poetry as mythology has only too obviously done.¹⁰ The reason for this is that nature has been killed by the rationalists because they do not understand senses, passions, man. 'Passion alone gives abstractions and hypotheses hands, feet, wings; images it endows with spirit, life, language. [...] Where [in science] do we find the rolling thunder of eloquence, or [...] the monosyllabic brevity of lightning?'¹¹

For this we must go to artists, for this we cannot go to the modern philosopher; we can go to the Bible, we can go to Luther, but not to the Greeks; to Milton, not to modern French versifiers. Why are the glorious organs of generation objects of shame? Do not speak of general human sentiment on this subject; this is not true; '*children* are not full of shame, nor are *savages* filled with shame, nor are the Cynic philosophers'.¹² *Pudeur* is an inherited piece of morality – a habit, due to consensus. By 'consensus' he means middle-class sentiment, against the Bible, against God, against thunder. 'If the feelings are mere *pudenda*, do they therefore cease to be the tools of virility?' he says.¹³ 'The *pudenda* of our organism are so closely united to the secret depths of our *heart* and *brain* that a total rupture of this natural union is incredible – impossible.'¹⁴

⁸ W iii 190.23.

⁹ W ii 201.4 ff.

¹⁰ W ii 205.20.

¹¹ W ii 208.20; 'monosyllabic' because the German for lightning is 'Blitz'.

¹² W iii 199.28.

¹³ W ii 208.11.

¹⁴ B v 167.16.

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Reason is identified by him with repression, not altogether unlike Blake. 'I have always sought to identify and pick out the *inferna* of a torso, rather than the *superna* of a bust,' he wrote to Herder in 1768; '[...] my coarse imagination has never been able to picture a creative spirit without *genitalia*.'¹⁵

Let me quote to you remarks which Blake made on this subject, which parallel this. When Blake says, for example, that men 'form'd laws of prudence, and call'd them / The eternal laws of God',¹⁶ this is a very, very Hamannian sentiment indeed.

Children of the future Age,
Reading this indignant page;
Know that in a former time,
Love! sweet Love! was thought a crime.¹⁷

This could almost be paralleled in a good many of Hamann's writings.

That they may call a shame & sin
Loves Temple that God dwelleth in
[...]
And render that a Lawless thing
On which the Soul Expands its wing.¹⁸

This is almost parallel. It's true, you could say that both in the case of Blake and in the case of Hamann, there is a common mystical tradition, in the case of Blake Swedenborg, in the case of Hamann very similar thinkers in Germany, who, as often in the writings of mystics, use sensuous and sexual imagery for all kinds of mystical religious emotion. Hamann belonged to this company, but he translated it into secular language, and he was one of the greatest defenders of spontaneous or natural behaviour, certainly in his day, whereby he did duly shock respectable persons. For example, on the

¹⁵ B ii 415.20.

¹⁶ *The First Book of Urizen*, plate 28, lines 4–7. The text followed in these quotations from Blake is that to be found in *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr (Oxford, 1978). References to this edition are given in parentheses, by volume and page, at the end of the relevant notes, thus: (i 282).

¹⁷ *Songs of Experience*, plate 51 ('A Little GIRL Lost'), lines 1-4 (i 196).

¹⁸ 'The Everlasting Gospel', p. 50 (ii 1060).

frontispiece of the *Socratic Memorabilia*, of his first important intellectual essay, he represents himself as the goat-footed god Pan. And this caused a certain amount of surprise and even shock in the more staid circles in Königsberg. The *beaux esprits* for whom the French are writing would never see the dawn of the rising day for they do not believe in the resurrection of the flesh. How can fastidious modern connoisseurs do anything, since they are ashamed of nature, cover her up, concern themselves only with the pretty clothes with which they hide her?

And then he says: 'Rules are the vestal virgins who populated Rome, thanks to the exceptions which they perpetrated.'¹⁹ This is a very typical Hamannian joke. Fig trees, he says, which provide us very usefully with leaves to cover our shame, nevertheless only feed us by allowing their fruit to drop. Now these kinds of images, particularly about the vestal virgins, is a very typical Hamann sentiment because the proposition is: rules are important, but it is also important to break them; the rules exist for the purpose of being broken in exceptional cases. Anything which pretends to have any degree of universal validity is a human fiction invented to constrict the spirit, and there is a perpetual propaganda in Hamann against repression in all its forms, anything which imprisons the living spirit, whether in the form of philosophical construction or in the form of political organisation or in the form of language.

Let me come to his linguistic theory, which is simply another illustration of this selfsame thesis. The origins of language were a very lively subject in the middle of the eighteenth century. All kinds of theories developed about the origins of language – all kinds of rival views were expressed about whether language was in fact an invention – a gadget, like the wheel, for example, or the screw, which human beings invented for certain purposes – or whether, on the contrary, it was a gift bestowed upon man by God. If you read, for example, Condillac, or if you read Lord Monboddo, you would find that they believed that language came into being as a result of certain biological or physiological needs. In Condillac it is a genuine physiological need, in Monboddo it's even a little more conscious: human beings seeking to communicate, seeking to express themselves, and finding that incoherent noises and gestures didn't perform this task sufficiently well, proceed in some almost

¹⁹ W ii 345.11.

conscious sense – almost, not quite – to invent language exactly as one invents a chair, a table, the screw, as one uses fire: that is to say, it is a specific invention generated by human beings in a utilitarian spirit at a certain point of human evolution.

This was denied very hotly by theologians, led by a German theologian called Süssmilch, who pointed out, quite correctly, that there was something illogical about this hypothesis, that in order to invent, human beings must think, that one thinks in symbols – that is what thought is – and therefore one cannot invent symbols because, since one uses them for the purpose of invention one cannot invent the act of inventing, and therefore the cart is put, there, before the horse. In 1772 the Berlin Academy offered a prize for the best essay on the origins of language, and Herder wrote one and obtained the prize. Herder was a very faithful disciple of Hamann, and Herder put forward an intermediate theory of language, neither the first nor the second, neither a priori nor wholly empirical. He said that Süssmilch was perfectly right to suppose that human beings could not suddenly have invented language like that; they could not have invented language because presumably words, symbols, the whole systematic use of certain marks on paper, or certain sounds, for certain purposes could not have been used by human beings until and unless their consciousness, their reason, their faculties had developed to a certain degree; and when their faculties, their consciousness and their reason had developed to this degree, then the very development of the consciousness and the faculties to this degree was in fact the use of symbolism. The use of symbolism was itself a natural organic development of human faculties in a certain direction. Therefore it was impossible to suppose that this was something which human beings had suddenly thought of: having not had language on a Tuesday, suddenly someone came, produced a brilliant invention, and on Wednesday, suddenly, this wonderful liberating instrument came into being, called language, after which we have never looked back.

That Herder correctly denied. On the other hand he did not see why Süssmilch should be right, who maintained that language was a gift of grace, that human beings were completely inarticulate before, suddenly God dropped language into their lap as a free gift of grace, and with surprise and gratification they suddenly observed themselves, they did not themselves know how, in possession of this miraculous faculty. That appeared to him equally irrational, equally

illogical, equally improbable, historically speaking, and therefore he produced a very sensible naturalistic theory by which reason and speech, being interwoven, develop as one, and therefore there isn't a specific problem about the invention of speech, just as there isn't a specific problem about the invention of reason, or the invention of the imagination, or the invention of sight, or the invention of hearing, or the invention of articulation. These things occur as they do.

Hamann was quite pleased with the essay, so far as it went, against Lord Monboddo or against Condillac or against Harris or against various other theories in the eighteenth century, but it was a little over-naturalistic for him, and he wrote to Herder, and he said: 'This will do, but you have left out the divine, you have left out God, you have left out the fact that God speaks to us, and we understand when God speaks to us, because he speaks to us and he has made us capable of understanding him. He has made everything. You implant in sensible nature that which belongs to God. Herder was moved by this – he admired Hamann more than any other living man. He described himself as 'a camel-driver who collects the golden apples which fall from the lap of the holy man sitting on the camel as he reads the Koran';²⁰ and, being in this mood, on the whole retracted, retracted partly because he wished to please Hamann, and partly, I daresay, because he was a Protestant clergyman and it ill behoves Protestant clergymen to deny the powers of God, and to deny, indeed, the doctrine of natural kinds which in this essay he did on the whole tend to deny. Nevertheless Hamann was stimulated by Herder's errors, as it seemed to him, to his own theory of language, which is somewhat analogous, but not entirely.

Now the thing, of course, which powerfully moved Hamann's indignation to the highest possible pitch of intensity was the remark of the abbé Dubos, who was an eminent French aesthete of this period, who said: 'What one has felt and thought in one language one can express with equal elegance in any other.' This appeared to Hamann to be one of the least veracious remarks ever made by a human being. He said that our cast of mind is entirely based on sensuous impressions; that sensuous impressions and associated

²⁰ [More literally: 'a Turkish camel-driver gathering up sacred apples before his holy ambler, which bears the Koran'. B ii 315.]

feelings, as he calls them, occurs differently in different organisms, in different climates and in different circumstances. If you wish to understand the Bible, he says, you must comprehend ‘the Oriental character of the eloquence of the flesh that takes us to the cradle of our race and religion’.²¹ Images come before words and images are created by passions, and passions are not analogous in men under different circumstances. He then says: Every man is unique, every man possesses his own character, and words, symbols, are the natural expression of these unique human beings. There may be certain similarities, but what is important, of course, as always for him, is the unique quintessence which every human being incorporates and which he expresses in a particular use of symbols which he enjoys.

The central proposition of Hamann is that there is no difference between words and thoughts, and this for his time was a moderately bold thing to say. It is not the case that there is something called ideas, such that you look for words like gloves to fit these ideas. It is not the case that you think in thoughts and then look for something called words, noises, marks on paper, symbols, pictures, whatever it may be, in which to incorporate these thoughts for the purpose of communicating them to others. If you cannot use symbols, you are not thinking at all. Thinking is symbol-using, thinking is using either images or words; these two acts are literally identical for him. Language and thought are one, like God and His Shekhinah, like God and his Tabernacle, he says.²² ‘Every court, every school, every profession, every closed corporation, every sect – each has’ – and must have – ‘its own vocabulary.’²³ How do we penetrate them? We can penetrate them only with the passion of ‘a friend, an intimate, a lover’²⁴ – by faith, by belief, not by rules. Why is this so? Because the uniqueness of each human being is expressed by his gestures, is expressed by his facial expression, is expressed by the spasmodic movements which he makes, is expressed by his gait, by the way in which he gets up and by the way in which he sits down, by a thousand small and unconsidered movements of his body and his soul, which for him, of course, are

²¹ W ii 170.37.

²² W iii 237.10.

²³ W ii 172.21.

²⁴ W ii 171.15.

one. That being so, language, symbolism is one of the means of expression of this uniqueness; and therefore the attempt to say that one can draw up rules for language, and that these rules are in some cases artificial rules, and that language submits to artificial rules exactly as, say, mathematics, which really is a human invention, submits to artificial rules, and that language is a tool, a gadget, an invention, and therefore is capable of being analysed into something which human beings have either discovered or invented for it, must be false.

You can no more invent language than you can invent feeling, than you can invent thought, than you invent any other natural human activity. And for him there is a mystical analogue to this. The mystical analogue is that when Adam was in paradise, then God spoke to him, he spoke to him in such a manner that Adam understood everything because the language in which God spoke was the language the understanding of which he implanted in Adam, and he understood without having to learn the language painfully as sometimes we have to; and the world, the very notion of what the world is, the whole notion of articulated experience, the whole notion of the distinction between the external and the internal world, the distinctions of colours and shapes, the distinction of any kind of categories and concepts in terms of which you try to describe and contrast objects in the world – all this is the function of language. Not only can you not do it without language, but to do it *is* to use language; that is what language *is*. It is the function of discriminating, of comparing, of saying, of thinking, of feeling. Even in feeling, says Hamann, some occult symbolism occurs, that is to say, once we become self-conscious, symbolism is intermixed with it. Now if that is so, then there is a certain sense in which your world *is* your symbols: there isn't a world stretched in front of you, a *rerum natura*, a given, coherent, articulated entity, and then you have to invent something or other with which to cover it, with which to articulate, with which to translate it, and that is why it is obviously absurd to say that what can be stated in one language can be stated with equal elegance in every other. What can be said in French cannot be fully said in German; what can be said in German cannot be fully said in English. Because these languages are the unique expressions of unique individuals living in unique circumstances and express differences as deeply as they express similarities, and what you can skim off, which is what the scientists do, that is to say, what

you can skim off if you do produce a generalised language of a highly conceptual kind which is extremely formal in its structure, simply invented for the purpose of catching similarities and omitting what are regarded as irrelevant differences, in other words when you invent a perfect translating machine, then what you catch with it is for Hamann not worth catching.

I don't say that he would necessarily deny that this was possible, but his point is: we use language for the purpose of experience; when we meet people, which is to him the most important of all phenomena, when we speak to other human beings, or to God, we wish to be understood and wish to understand them; this cannot be done by any application of mechanical rules. These things are at most some kind of aid, but they are not the key to understanding. Understanding is a unique act of mutual recognition which is not susceptible to the rules inasmuch as it is of necessity unique and of necessity sufficiently dissimilar to other such acts to be of supreme value in itself – something of that kind. As you may perceive, he exaggerates; he exaggerates, and indeed one could say about him, as one could say about other thinkers, that very few thinkers – the thought of very few thinkers has survived who did not exaggerate. But Hamann perhaps exaggerated a little too much. At any rate, he supposes that philosophy is entirely concerned with words. This is a very modern-sounding statement. He certainly supposes that metaphysics and philosophy, whether true or false, is not concerned with things; it is concerned with concepts, with categories, and these concepts and categories are words. 'All idle talk about reason is mere wind', he says; 'language is its organon and criterion!'²⁵ Language is like currency: men of genius can use it, but officials turn it, as they do everything, to sterile dogmatism, which they proceed to offer for their own worship by the people. And among these sterile officials he includes metaphysicians and philosophers of his own time.

Creation is speech.²⁶ 'Through [language] are *all things* made.'²⁷ This mysterious statement means that God created the universe by some articulated act which is at any rate analogous to some conscious act, which is analogous to thinking. Just as God therefore must have implanted and created the world or articulated it by using,

²⁵ B v 108.6.

²⁶ B i 393.28.

²⁷ B vi 108.24.

as Hamann supposes, those sacred symbols of which we sometimes catch glimpses, if only we attend to the words of the Bible sufficiently closely, so we, when we ask ourselves what the world is like, can only operate by means of our symbols and our words, which are not detachable from the world to which they apply. Indeed they do not apply to anything, they are part of it. The whole of the Hamann doctrine is that the notion of dividing the words and what the words are about – objects and symbols – is one more instance of this appalling act of diremption, of cutting, of abstraction, of division which has bedevilled the entire history of rational thought. That is why the cardinal sin, for Hamann, is to mistake, as he says – ‘to mistake *words* for *concepts* and *concepts* for *real things*’,²⁸ which metaphysicians have done from the beginning of time. ‘Reason is language, *logos*. On this marrowbone I gnaw, and shall gnaw myself to death on it’,²⁹ he said to Herder three years before he died. ‘Every phenomenon of nature’ – let me give you a typical mystical passage by Hamann, so as not to make him out too modern a philosopher, too much of a modern linguistic philosopher, although you will perceive certain affinities, because the very notion that philosophy is about language, that paralogsms of the understanding, which Kant talks about for example, in the *Critique of the Pure Reason*, according to Hamann are simply paralogsms of words, language. If we get into paradoxes, as Kant tries to prove, if we get into contradictions of a certain kind, these contradictions are not due to the mistaken function of certain faculties on our part. Faculties cannot make mistakes, says Hamann; faculties just operated, so to speak; besides which there are no faculties. There is only one act of cognition: all these divisions into intuition, understanding, imagination, fancy, reason, *Vernunft*, *Verstand*, all these words, all this is idle chatter for him; there is only cognition or action – and cognition and action are one, of course, for him. To recognise the world is already to take up an attitude towards it; to take up an attitude towards it is to act in a certain fashion; and therefore thought and action are one, and he may for this reason also be regarded as one of the fathers of the famous theory of the unity of theory and practice. Well:

²⁸ B v 264.36.

²⁹ B v 177.18.

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Every phenomenon of nature was a word – a sign, symbol or pledge of a new, inexpressible but all the more intimate union, communication and community of divine energy and ideas. Everything that man heard in the beginning, and saw with his eyes, contemplated, all that his hands touched, was a living word. For God was the Word. With this word in his mouth and in his heart the origin of language was as natural, as near and as easy as child's play.³⁰

That is how it was with Adam in Paradise. After that there was the Fall, human arrogance, the Tower of Babel, and the terrible cold destruction made by philosophical reason. Rational religion is a contradiction in terms, like rational language. There is nothing which Hamann would have rejected with more fervour and indignation than the notion of a logically perfect language, or a logically correct language. The notion that there is a *rerum natura*, there is a structure of reality to which you can adjust language as a grid or as a machine, would have appeared to him to be the denial of the most self-evident of all facts.

One of the little tracts in which he makes it clear what his attitude is towards language is a very peculiar and very typical little pamphlet which he produced, which is called 'The Apologia [or the Defence] of the Letter *h*', which he published some time in the 1770s. It arose as follows.

There was a perfectly respectable Lutheran theologian called Damm in Berlin, who, in the course of offering various suggestions about the possible etymological reform of German, suggested that the letter *h*, when it came after consonants in German or where it came at the end of words, played no part, had no use – it did not add to the actual sound – and therefore for reasons of utility might as well be dropped. This aroused Hamann's rage in no uncertain manner. He said that the letter *h*, of course, was exactly as it had been described as being; certainly it was of no use. The notion of getting rid of things because they were of no use seemed to him the worst of all possible reasons for any form of action at all. Damm wishes to get rid of this poor letter *h*, he says, in order to create a spick and span world, a swept and garnished world in which everything shall be useful, everything shall be clear, everything shall be elegant, and everything shall be symmetrical. One can already

³⁰ W iii 32.21.

foresee what the nature of the criticism is going to be. This leaves out from the world everything which is irregular, everything which is irrational; all it leaves is Leibniz's 'sufficient reason'. If things do not have sufficient reason, out with them. Sufficient reason, says Hamann, is 'a lamentable, poor, blind, naked' little thing.³¹ 'Your life', says the letter *b* suddenly, addressing itself to Baron Grimm in Paris, who supported Damm in this matter³² – 'Your life is what I am myself, a breath [*ein Hauch – b*].'³³ God has created poor little useless *b*, but he will not be allowed to perish from the earth, says Hamann suddenly. And then there is a tremendous hymn to God, which immediately follows. Those who wish to prove God by design have no faith in such as me, says the letter *b*; such a God exists only by the logic of vain, puffed-up logicians, and the logician is obviously prior to the God whom he creates. In such a universe I – little *b* – could not survive, but thanks to the true God I do and shall.

It was no great distance from this – and from then, you see, Hamann goes on to defend every kind of ancient institution. You can see, the door is then opened to a tremendous Romantic defence of everything which is useless but old, useless but has meaning for people, useless but expresses in some unique way the impalpable, the immeasurable, the unanalysable essence of something which reason condemns. He says that ancient institutions and usages must be defended, because if they are suppressed, then there is a danger that the soul will be killed altogether, as the French reformer obviously seemed to be doing. In a world, he says, built by Helvétius there will be no colour, no novelty, no genius, no thunder, no lightning, no agony, no transfiguration. That is what, of course, Goethe meant in that famous passage when he talks about his life in Strasburg when he was young in the 1770s, and he met Herder, who was suffering with a disease of the eyes, and Herder preached to him what in effect he had learned from Hamann. Referring to

³¹ W iii 100.21.

³² Damm and his ilk are apostrophised by Hamann as 'You little prophets of Böhmischn-Breda!' (W iii 106.9, 107.15), an allusion to *Le Petit Prophète de Boehmischbroda* (n.p., 1753), a pamphlet ostensibly reporting the vaticinations of a prophet born in a Bohemian village, actually by Baron Friedrich Melchior von Grimm, the celebrated Paris critic, a correspondent of Catherine the Great, a friend of Diderot, Holbach and many other figures of the Enlightenment.

³³ W iii 105.4.

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Holbach's famous *Système de la nature*, which is a famous atheistical and naturalistic work, Goethe says:

We could not conceive how such a book could be dangerous; it appears to us so dark, so cold, so Cimmerian, so corpse-like that we found it difficult to endure its presence and shuddered at it as at a ghost. The author imagines that he gives a book a special recommendation when he says in its preface that as a decrepit old man, just sinking into the grave, he wishes to declare the truth to his contemporaries and to posterity before he dies. We laughed at him. Old churches, we said, have dark windows; to know how cherries and berries taste, we must ask children and sparrows. These are our gibes, these are our maxims. How hollow and how empty we felt in this melancholy, atheistical half-night, in which the earth vanished with all its images, heaven with all its stars.³⁴

That is direct Hamannian doctrine. Without Hamann, Herder would not have believed these things, and without Herder, Goethe is scarcely likely to have spoken them. That was the way in which these doctrines were transformed into Goethe's prose, and in this way achieved a world stage, and world fame.

This is Hamann's doctrine of language, and from this it is no great distance to his political views, which I might say something about here too. He believes, because of the letter *h*, that everything old, everything decrepit, everything which is ancient must be preserved. He obviously thinks that the crooked alleyways of the past must not be straightened out, for fear of losing something impalpable. This is rather like his friend Moser, who practised conservatism of a very analogous order. Our ancestors knew what they were doing. By altering things too much, by straightening things out, by sweeping the universe too clean we are removing that in it which is dear to us, which gives us a sense of our own identity and past – general conservative doctrine. Hamann went further than this. In the course of an attack on a book called *Master and Servant* by a well-known enlightened German bureaucrat called Karl Friedrich von Moser, which was a paean to enlightened despotism, in fact, Hamann says: So that it is what we are to believe. The enlightened despot on the top, and everyone else below. This is the rational universe.

³⁴ *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*, ed. Siegfried Scheibe, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1970), book 11, p. 405.

And he proceeds to identify, in a very typical fashion, political absolutism, scientific rationalism and generalising propositions in the sphere of aesthetics. Despotism in aesthetics on the part of the abbé Batteux and the abbé Dubos precisely corresponds to enlightened despotism on the part of von Moser's despot, and precisely corresponds to the general propositions which Helvétius and Holbach would like us to substitute for the intuitive, rather – somewhat more, rather more crooked, less elegant, less symmetrical views which men naturally live by. A constitution, says Hamann, can be written, a constitution can be published, a constitution cannot be believed in, a constitution cannot be lived, and we need something in terms of which life can be lived. Therefore all these attempts to create a schema whereby rational organisation takes the place of that chaotic growth which God has stimulated by his imaginative gifts as the artist of the universe, the attempt to alter that which God has created in the direction of rules or formulae which God can plainly not have stimulated, and cannot have stimulated, or has stimulated merely to our doom, cannot have stimulated at least in his capacity as a benevolent creator, as you will discover by reading the Bible, which is chaotic and rightly so. There is always this harking back, always this contrast between the generalisations of the French and the thunder and the lightning and the chaos and the dark woods of the Bible, of Luther and so forth. Since this is so, this is what spells our doom.

He came back to the attack against Mendelssohn and against Kant. The position about Mendelssohn was quite an interesting one. They were friends. Mendelssohn was his first publisher; he thought Hamann, as I told you in my first lecture, was an interesting man with touches of brilliance; he published some of his writings in his Berlin publication, he and Nicolai, and then, towards the end of his life, published a celebrated work called *Jerusalem*, which is a plea for toleration for minorities in general and the Jews in particular. And in it he develops the perfectly conventional view, which a great many persons at that period held, and of which Mendelssohn gives a perfectly eloquent, though not perhaps a very first-hand exposition, about the relations of the Church and the State, and about the foundations of political life in general; and he says: echoing Spinoza, echoing to some extent Locke, echoing a good many rationalists in the eighteenth century, that after all the State is founded upon two great foundations – natural law and the contract. Natural law is that

which any reasonable being perceives to be true; that is what the Stoics have told us, that is what Cicero has told us, that is what St Thomas has told us. As for promises, this is a social contract which must be kept because the keeping of contracts – *pacta sunt servanda* – is itself a part of natural law.

Now, if this is so, then since the State is founded upon this rational foundation, since the whole moral foundation of the State rests upon the existence in it of rational men who have with rational freedom undertaken to live a certain kind of life, to obey a certain kind of government, not to perform certain acts, because they are anti-social in character, and to obey the laws provided they are passed in a form of which they approve, and which is rational in character – since this is so, any State which suppresses rationality suppresses its own foundations. It can repress conduct, which it may not like because this conduct is dangerous to the foundations of the State as such. It can repress opinion where this opinion is dangerous. But to impose violent censorship, to impose religion, to impose unanimity of moral opinions against the freedom of rational beings is to cut off the metaphysical or moral branch on which the State itself may be said to be sitting. Well, this was not, as I say, a very unconventional point of view. This is quite normal, and Mendelssohn published this in the interests of the Jews, who, he said, possess a religion which was indeed different to that of Christians, but their actions in no way departed from the normal conventions of the times – they were good citizens. All that men could be expected to do in a State was to obey its laws. If they obeyed its laws, and did not preach any doctrine which was subversive of the State, then their religion was a private affair, because they had a right as rational beings to make a choice of that which they believe, provided this was not in itself subversive of life together – something of that kind. And this was therefore a plea for the State to keep its hands off religion, the State to keep its hands off moral and theological beliefs.

Hamann is exceedingly indignant. He says: So the State is founded on contract. In other words, if it were possible by reason to refute the proposition, say, that the contract had been entered into by me or by my ancestors, or if it were possible by reason to refute the proposition that natural law is such as Isadore Seville says it is, or such as St Thomas says it is, or somebody else says – if it were possible to disprove this, then the State would dissolve at once,

it would disintegrate immediately, it would fall into pieces. Nobody but a fool can believe this. The State is an ancient product of human symbiosis. It is created by the intercommunication of human beings with emotions, intuitions, flesh as well as spirit – we come back to all the regular Hamannian theses at this point – all these faculties on the part of men, or if they are not to be called faculties, all these means of interlacing on the part of human beings, which is what men are, for men are organically and essentially intercommunicating beings, for they cannot be conceived in any other terms – all this is not the product of reason; this is the product of life together, this is the product of love, of hatred, of jealousy, of ambition, of the worship of God, of all kinds of complex and unanalysable human relations – he speaks the language which is somewhat similar to that of Burke, but a great deal more extravagant, and a great deal more violent. And Mendelssohn tells us that if these propositions were refuted or even contradicted then this whole structure would fall to pieces, as if it was a house of cards held together by nothing more than mere rational agreement. Even the justification of it cannot be regarded as that, because there is no such thing as justifying what there is; we do not justify trees, we do not justify animals, we do not justify the imagination, we do not justify thought, we do not justify man; why on earth, then, should we justify something which is equally natural, equally indestructible, equally eternal, namely society? And as for the State, it is simply a particular form which this society has taken in the course of natural, irregular, crooked, essentially asymmetrical growth, which is naturally hostile to the artificial reason of the Paris reasoners.

He then goes on to say: And what is more, Mendelssohn wants us to believe that religion should take its proper place in the State. This means that God must know where he belongs, he must not go out of the proper bounds which are set for him by the civic authorities. Religion must not interfere with the normal civilised habits of men. You can imagine the reaction which Hamann produces against this. And there follows a very violent and very passionate sermon to the effect that the very notion that the most sacred things there are, that our faith in God, that that by which we live our lives and the most sacred principles of all, our communication with our maker, which is the whole of the end and goal of our existence – to relegate this to be simply another province of life, like paying taxes, like serving in the army, like any other

normal function of human beings, that is the form of the profoundest possible blasphemy against nature, against man and against God. In short, he is pleading for what ultimately comes to a loose anarchistic theocracy. He says that the notion of saying: Religion is all very well in its place, but it won't do if it interferes with the serious concerns of life – which is a parody or caricature which he produces of Mendelssohn – that this is an absolute denial of all that is most important and most profound in individual and in social existence. He then transfers his attack to Kant, whom he was rather fond of baiting. He liked Kant personally, Kant lent him money, Kant was kind to him. Kant thought he was rather mad, but was amiable to him and said: 'When these men talk, I never know whether to regard him as a man of genius, or as an ape of genius,' he said: 'if the latter, then all we can do is simply continue with our own work quietly, steadily, assiduously, and taking no notice of these eccentricities' – and did so.³⁵ Kant, he says, as a loyal Prussian, in a little pamphlet called *Answering the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, which was an attack upon paternalist government, which should have pleased Hamann to that extent, Kant said that if the prince or the sovereign orders me to do something that I deem to be wrong, I must as a private person – still more as an official – carry it out; I have no right to disobey; but as a rational being, being a member of a rational society, I have a duty to criticise such an order. I am a combination, on the one hand of a private person, and on the other of a publicist or a philosopher, a theologian or a professor, whose duty it is, of course, always to speak out. Hamann says: So, a professor is at once a master and a slave, a guardian and a minor, an adult and a child. 'So the public use of reason and liberty is but a dessert, whereas the private use of these excellent things is the daily bread that we must give up, the better to taste the dessert.'³⁶ In public I wear the trappings of freedom as professor, while at home I have nothing but the rags of a slave, as the obedient servant of Frederick the Great. What on earth is the use of this? Faith alone gives us strength to resist guardians and tutors, who not only kill our bodies, but empty our pockets, and we cannot do this by mere means of Kant's abstract 'good will'.

³⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht*, part 1, book 1, § 58: p. 226, line 10, in *Kant's gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 8 (Berlin, 1907).

³⁶ B v 292.5.

And there follows a tremendous attack on intellectuals of this type, who subvert natural human morality. And he goes on to say: Obedience to reason is simply a call to open rebellion. Nicolai, who was Mendelssohn's co-editor in Berlin, and a very reasonable, amiable, high-minded and tolerant man, and did a very great deal for German enlightenment and education, once wrote of Hamann: 'There is room in the world for both of us';³⁷ after all, they didn't understand each other. Hamann said: Certainly not. There is not room for both truth and falsehood: one or other must perish in the fight. Rationalists, philosophers, scientists, Jews,³⁸ foreigners must be kept in their place. Now this has a sinister note because it embodies in one a kind of anti-rationalism, anti-intellectualism, demotic patriotism which was there in Hamann, the roots of faith in the deep, irrational instincts of the common people against the murderous and dehydrating effect of highbrow intellectuals, which afterwards entered as an ingredient into all kinds of chauvinistic exhibitions in Germany, and ultimately entered in as an element into Fascism itself. Hamann himself, be it said to his honour, never took part in the persecution of rationalism which did occur after the death of Frederick the Great. He was too eccentric, too isolated, too queer, too much on his own to do any of these things. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that this kind of propaganda undoubtedly did enter into the general brew of anti-intellectualism, anti-rationalism, illiberalism and the kind of collective emotionalism which

³⁷ '[E]s ist Raum für Dich und uns in der Welt': *Allgemeine deutsche Bibliothek*, supplement to vols 25–36 (1775–8), part 4, 2479 (reprinted in *Hamann's Schriften*, ed. Friedrich Roth [Berlin, 1821–43], viii, ed. Gustav Adolph Weiner, part 1, 282), and quoted by Jean Blum, *La Vie et l'oeuvre de J.-G. Hamann, le 'Mage du Nord', 1730–1788* (Paris, 1912), 370 ('il y a place pour toi et pour nous en ce monde'). [How do we know this comment was made by Nicolai? Does it follow from his being editor of the *A. d. B.*? The specific review is unsigned.]

³⁸ [Hamann's attitude to the Jews has been the subject of some dispute. See, for example, the essay by Ze'ev Levy on Hamann's controversy with Mendelssohn in Bernhard Gajek and Albert Meier (eds), *Johann Georg Hamann und die Krise der Aufklärung* (Frankfurt am Main etc., 1990), 327–44. However, there is undoubtedly a scattering of anti-Jewish remarks in Hamann's writings (see, for example, W iii 146.34, 151.31, 395.11, 397.18; B vii 181.6, 467.26; as well as several passages in *Golgotha und Scheblimini!*); and although he was certainly concerned to defend what he saw as true Judaism against perversions of it, and well disposed to Mendelssohn as an individual, it is not plausible to maintain that he was free of what later came to be called anti-Semitism. In this he was, of course, entirely typical of his age.]

afterwards developed into all kinds of irrationalist movements in the nineteenth century.

I fear that I must end. Finally let me say this. If you say what – why should Hamann be paid any attention to at all? Well, he exaggerated, as I say, as all philosophers who ever made a mark, I think, or nearly all, exaggerated. Erasmus did not exaggerate, and we do not read him. Thomas Reid did not exaggerate, and we do not read him much. If you ask yourself about the great thinkers of the world, you will find that they generally exaggerated. Hamann lived at a time when there is no doubt that there was a considerable simplification of the sociology and psychology and general attitudes towards what men were and society was, and this outraged him and he naturally went too far in the opposite direction in trying to restore what he regarded as the proper balance in this respect. He constantly tries to break through the crust of complacency, of smugness, of the general acceptance of scientific formulae as the key to life. He saw a world in which it appeared to him that human beings had broken up, in which we had over-specialised. If you wish to put it in sociological terms, I suppose it is possible to suppose that Hamann was a seventeenth-century man who survived into the eighteenth century, rather as Dr Johnson was in England. That he lived in the enlightened State of Frederick the Great – Frederick the Great was undoubtedly trying to make Prussia the most powerful and the most important State in Germany, and he was going there by forced marches. He produced agricultural crisis by his mercantilist policy, he introduced education and then was unable to provide sufficient employment for the children of poor but educated men. He drove subjects, both military and civilian, in a very ruthless manner, and stamped upon all kinds of ancient institutions, altered them, rationalised them, centralised them and altogether vigorously tried to make an extremely modern State out of Prussia, which to some degree he succeeded in doing, somewhat in the manner, though perhaps not quite so violently, as Peter the Great in Russia.

Hamann was the voice – Hamann's voice was the voice of a toad beneath the harrow. His universe was being shot to pieces, his whole emotional and cultural tendency was towards something older, something far less rationalistic, and he saw in Frederick the Great, whom he calls contemptuously 'the Solomon of Prussia', simply an Ahab who takes away Naboth's vineyard – he, Hamann, being Naboth – simply a wicked king who puts up a lot of wooden idols

before his people in the form of reason, science, symmetry, order, all these totally inhuman values into which human flesh is being ground, and by which appalling uniformity is being introduced in what was before that, at least for him, a world of living and therefore asymmetrical beings. And that is, I suppose, the reason for and the essence of this *cri de coeur*. A great many of the things which Hamann said were plainly not true. His attacks on Kant missed the point. He failed to perceive that the *Critique of Pure Reason* was a profound philosophical work. His proposition that general propositions should never be used, or that concepts and categories are of no use, is quite obviously meaningless. A great many of the charges which he levels at French science and French historical writing are beside the point.

Let me say one more thing. Hamann did not care in the least about science and history. If he was told that scientists were simply curious about the way things were and wished to predict and control them, he would not have minded. If he was told that what historians wanted to do was simply to discover how things happened, and use the most rational methods for the purpose of reconstructing the past, he would perhaps have agreed; but these things were of no interest to him. He was not curious about the past, and he was not interested in ordinary human lives; he was not interested in social facts as such; he was, as many such persons are, completely blind to human misery round him; he was not interested in social problems. He was completely absorbed in an act of mystical illumination of his own within himself, and as often happens to such people, he saw most clearly because he looked fanatically out of one window; but out of that window he did see what others did not see, and without Hamann neither Herder nor the German Romantic movement, nor all its consequences, both deleterious and beneficent, is altogether thinkable.

Tomorrow I propose to talk about the very different figure of Joseph de Maistre.

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