

THREE TURNING-POINTS
IN POLITICAL THOUGHT

3 *Romanticism*

This is a lightly edited transcript of a text of a lecture in Isaiah Berlin's papers. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.

SO FAR I HAVE tried to establish that two out of the three principles on which, it seems to me, Western philosophy has rested, namely the view that man is essentially a social being and the assumption that all his true values are compatible with one another in a harmonious solution of his problems, were, if not destroyed, at any rate seriously compromised by the Hellenistic philosophers and Machiavelli respectively. Now we come to the third leg of the tripod, that to questions of value, whether moral or political, it is possible to discover answers in the way in which they are discovered to questions of fact or questions of logic – in other words that such questions as ‘Why should anyone obey anyone else?’ or ‘What rights have individuals against society or society against individuals?’ or ‘Is the State an instrument, a means, or is it an element in the proper end of men on earth?’ have answers the validity of which can be demonstrated by a method guaranteed to establish the truth, that is, can be known as factual or mathematical propositions are known; that questions of this sort can, at least in principle, be finally answered by descriptive propositions, like all other genuine questions.

If this is not so, does it make any sense to speak of truth or falsehood in moral or political matters? If the questions cannot, in principle, be answered, not because of our ignorance or stupidity or perversity, but because there is something logically wrong here, what becomes of all our ethics and all our politics, and how do we act? Is there any sense in saying that some acts are rational and some are not, or that some men are right and others wrong in matters of conduct? Clearly, if this most fundamental principle is

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

questioned or denied, this would upset and subvert what have been the foundations of human belief for many centuries, for the orthodox as well as for the rebels. For the battles had hitherto been fought over the question of which answer was correct, not whether answers could be returned at all.

Yet this is in effect what those romantic philosophers to whom I now turn, whether they knew it or not, tended to establish. And although it may be thought that some of them went too far and wildly overshot every possible mark, yet the world has never been the same since, and our politics and our morals have been deeply transformed by them. Certainly this has been the most radical, and indeed terrifying, not to say dramatic, change in men's outlook in modern times. At least that is my thesis. I will now attempt to substantiate it.

Before going any further, there is one thing that I should like to add. I asserted earlier, and I do not think it would be widely denied, that the assumption that questions of value were capable of being answered correctly or incorrectly in the form of statements that corresponded or did not correspond to reality was common to virtually all schools of Western thought. Men differed about where to look for these answers: some, with Plato, believed in a special, non-empirical rational faculty; others believed in the consensus of mankind or of their own particular group as it was transmitted by legal or social enactments, or by traditional beliefs. Some believed that the answers were known only to the privileged men – inspired prophets, or an organised Church to which the word of God, who knew the answer, was vouchsafed. Others believed that it was to be obtained by observation and experiment in laboratories or by rational calculation. Some found it in the reflections of lonely thinkers, others in the pronouncements of assemblies; some in the conclusion of experts, others in the simple heart of an uncorrupted human being – a child, a savage, a peasant. Bloody wars were fought over the correct path to the truth about the most important problems of life and death; and no wonder, when upon this everything plainly depended. Nothing could matter more profoundly or was better worth laying down one's life for; even the subjectivists and relativists did not really depart from this point of view.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

In his elegant and delightful lectures to this very Foundation,¹ Carl Becker took the view that this whole outlook was broken to pieces by the scepticism and anti-intellectualism of Hume, that he laid the time-bomb that blew up the orthodoxies of Christian metaphysicians, atheistic rationalists and scientific empiricists alike; and no doubt Hume's distinction of propositions of fact from distinctions of value was very revolutionary, and without it the philosophy of Kant and of the Idealists and much of what is being said at present would not have arisen. Nevertheless, I do not believe Becker to have been altogether right: for the revolution of which I speak seems to me to go far deeper and to have far more radical consequences.

Even Hume and his predecessors – the Greek Sophists and relativists of Montesquieu's type – did not deny that questions of value could be correctly answered by factual statements. When the Sophists maintained that fire burned both in Athens and in Persia, but human laws and customs change before our very eyes (as quoted by Aristotle); when Montesquieu caused a scandal by saying that when Montezuma said to Cortes that the religion of Spaniards was very well for the Spaniards but that the religion of the Aztecs might be best for them, what Montezuma said was not absurd; when Hume reduced moral and political beliefs to sentiment, and the perception of what promoted the interests of different men or groups in differing circumstances, which might not be the same for all men at all times, and which depended on feelings rather than on truths independent of men's needs – all that they were saying was that the truth, the objective truth, was to be sought for not in the external world, nor in a priori metaphysical propositions, nor in revelation, but in psychology or sociology. The proposition that, since men seek security or pleasure, say, the methods of obtaining these blessings in Persia will be different from those best employed in Paris – that what is the best treatment for my wife in Bukhara is not best for my wife in Birmingham – is objectively demonstrable. It not compatible with other doctrines about objective universal truths, but it still lives within the realm of discoverable empirical fact. Instead of looking without, you are invited to look within: the ends of men are not thought so very different, but if they are different, then

¹ Carl L. Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932). [Which Foundation?]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

that too is an empirical fact, the truth of which can be shown by accredited methods to the satisfaction of all honest enquirers. We are still moving in the realm of objective factual propositions. It is only that propositions of value turn out to be propositions of fact different from those which they had been taken to be – but still propositions of fact, not statements of some quite different order altogether. For this reason, I think that Becker exaggerated the Humean revolution; at least, it seems to me a smaller thing than the one I am about to describe.

For the thinkers whom I propose to discuss came to deny that answers to questions of value could be discovered at all: they came to the conclusion that these answers were not discovered, but invented; not found – like secret treasure to which few knew the way but which was there to be uncovered by theologians or psychologists, or physicists, or philosophers – but not there at all; created, and before it was created nowhere, non-existent. And since each creator could create differently, and since the actions inspired by these creations, which might take the form of rules or principles or goals, might clash, and since inventions unlike discoveries are not susceptible of the criteria of truth or falsehood, the clashes were not capable of resolution; indeed, the very idea that they were showed a profound misunderstanding of what men were, what purposes were, what moral and social life were altogether.

If I give an illustration of what I mean, the distance traversed within these years – between the middle of the eighteenth century and the beginning of the nineteenth – may become more vividly apparent. When men disagreed about essentials, say about whether kings had divine rights, or whether men could legitimately be coerced by an authority in whose establishment they played no part, it was assumed throughout such disputes that one side of the argument at any rate must be mistaken, and that in principle there must be some method of demonstrating such a mistake to any rational being in possession of the relevant facts and arguments. Certainly the proposition that both sides might be in some sense right – that Royalists and Roundheads, ultramontane monarchists and atheistical democrats were both justified in fighting and dying for their beliefs – would have seemed as absurd as saying that those who said that grass was green and those who said it was red were both stating important findings; or that those who said twice two was four and those who said that it was seventeen were both

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

admirable mathematicians. Clearly there was only one true answer to a genuine question and all the other answers were false.

This is the basic presupposition of the notion of true and false descriptive propositions. But when in the early nineteenth century a man believed in his country, and that only his country deserved to dominate the world, and another man believed the very same proposition about *his* country, there were men to be found who thought that both these individuals were required by their beliefs to lay down their lives for a proposition which, if they were both descriptive and answers to the same question, could not both be true. The normal belief was that I believed something that was sacred to me, and for which I was prepared to sacrifice all I had, and you believed its precise opposite – and something which was incompatible with it – so that we could not both strive for our respective ends, for they obstructed one another. Then it was in some sense right or noble, or dictated by something in virtue of which men were men, that we should fight it out, and if need be both die for our opposed principles; for the only thing that was regarded as contemptible and ignoble was compromise, betrayal of our respective and incompatible ideals in favour of something that we had in common – for example, the need for security, the pursuit of happiness, the avoidance of conditions in which no ideals could be pursued. And we were moreover expected to admire each other's point of view even while fighting to our death against it. The purposes for which we were respectively fighting could not be regarded as correct or incorrect, valid or invalid; what mattered was only whether the state of mind in which we were doing so was disinterested, whether our motive was pure, whether the goal for which we fought truly expressed what we believed – the light by which we lived – whether we were prepared to die for our ideals against great odds, whether we were prepared to face disgrace, misery, martyrdom. 'To be free is nothing; to seek freedom is everything,' said Fichte, who expressed, and indeed had a large part in inventing, this attitude. Why was it 'everything'? Because what mattered was the motive, the state of soul, the spiritual condition, not the result, the consequence, which was a matter of causality or luck, over which we had little control.

Let me press this point again. If in the seventeenth century a Protestant were to say that, although his Catholic adversary believed something false, wicked, dangerous, for which he deserved extermination, yet one could not but admire him for his

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

steadfast courage, the deep sincerity, the self-forgetful dedication with which he held and acted upon these false beliefs, and that this was admirable and noble and brought him nearer to God, such sentiments would have been regarded as insane. In fact no one could have said so then or, it seems to me, at any earlier period. Men who held false beliefs with intensity and were prepared to dedicate their lives to them could be regarded with compassion: a Christian knight did not spit on the corpse of his Moslem enemy; he could regret that such virtues as courage and loyalty should be wasted upon false and horrible beliefs; but he did not congratulate him upon this attitude of mind in which he defended the nonsense for which he died, any more than we today respond positively to the proposition, say, 'When he says that Washington is the capital of Cuba, he really means it; he's being perfectly candid, he's ready to lay down his life for this proposition, he does not say it for money or in expectation of some personal advantage.'

We think nothing admirable about such an egregious view because if one believes that to the question 'What is the capital of Cuba?' there is one true answer and one only, then the important thing is to get it right. And pre-romantic beliefs about politics were certainly based upon the same assumption: that somewhere there was a true answer, and the important thing was to discover who knew it or could know it, how to obtain it, who were the wise, the expert, if possible the infallible. Admiration for motive, state of soul, attitude for their own sakes arises only where that to which the attitude is adopted, that which is the ideal, that which the soul seeks after is no longer conceived in terms of either-or, of true or false, real or illusory, but in some other terms which are not descriptive, not truth-containing. This is what is nowadays called the realm of ideology: which is distinguished precisely by the fact that it is not considered susceptible to truth and falsehood in the way in which simple factual or mathematical or scientific propositions are; but has something to do with states of mind, general attitudes like optimism or pessimism, rationalism or irrationalism, individualism or collectivism, to which the criteria of truth and falsehood do not, at any rate in any direct fashion, seem to apply.

Indeed the shift of which I speak – and I have made no attempt as yet to trace its evolution – is perhaps best illustrated by the uses of the words 'idealism' and 'realism'. What is the meaning of the word 'idealism', used not in its philosophical but in its everyday

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

sense? A man is called idealistic if he is governed within certain limits by purposes in which he believes for their own sakes. Idealists are persons who wish to bring about certain states of affairs on earth, no matter what: and judge human beings in terms of the principles by which they govern their own lives, principles that are sacred to them, that is, which they will not transgress no matter how great the danger which maintenance of these principles entails. Realists, on the contrary, especially since Hegel, are persons who appear ready to compromise, for the sake of some material advantage, any principles to which they might otherwise adhere. Certainly the overtones of the word 'realism' have come to include readiness to abandon a vision of life, which for the visionary possesses absolute value, in favour of an adjustment to circumstances which may have small value in his eyes, but which, being unalterable, threaten to destroy him unless he adapts himself to them. In this way 'idealism' comes to be connected with absolute principles and 'realism' with opportunism and compromise and a somewhat callow attitude towards moral and political principles.

The point I wish to make is that the word 'idealism', as well as the idea, is relatively modern. The word is certainly not to be found in common use before the nineteenth century; and the notion that it denotes, that one should respect men who are prepared to sacrifice advantage, happiness, security to ends in themselves, no matter what these ends are – that such persons are more entitled to respect than those who may pursue ends that are sympathetic to you, but which they pursue with less dedication and a good many sidelong glances at the possibilities of accommodating themselves more comfortably in the world, while appearing, at any rate, not to depart from these ends too far – this is something brand new. No doubt, as I remarked above, even the notion of idealism has its limits: a man whose absolute end is the destruction of mankind or the collection of cigarette-ends for their own sake does not impress our moral imagination. Monsters and madmen, barbarians and fanatics are excluded from the list because they are regarded as falling, in some sense, outside the pale of normal humanity; to this degree the notion of natural law, in however weakened and empirical a guise, still operates, and is, indeed, the last, but I think unbreakable, defence against unbridled romanticism. But within these very wide frontiers we are liable to respect idealists for being idealists, whereas, if I am right, neither

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

the word nor the idea would have meant anything to men before, say, the early eighteenth century. Considering the degree to which idealism is regarded as a valid defence of human conduct, and a category through which we look at fellow men, this in itself is surely a significant symptom of some immense shift in our moral and political consciousness.

What were the origins of the movement that subverted the idea that there are moral and political truths that all rational men can discover and verify for themselves? It has at least three roots and they are these: (*a*) the doctrine of freedom in the philosophy of Kant; (*b*) the individualism and anti-universalism that attained to fame with Herder; (*c*) the interpretation of life in terms of the aesthetic model of Fichte, Schelling, Schlegel and the other writers of the early Romantic movement in Germany.

It will be seen that all these authors are Germans: and it is perhaps no accident that passionate defense of individualism, anti-rationalism and mystical self-absorption in the inner life should have occurred in a country whose capacity for participating in the public life of Europe and the rational, universal, truth-directed values characteristic of the great body of Western tradition was broken by the fearful defeat and humiliation which the Germans suffered at the hands of Louis XIV during the Thirty Years War. There is always an immense and dangerous force in individuals or nations driven in upon themselves, into a kind of inner immigration, by exclusion from the general human heritage forced upon them by despots or conquerors. Germany was a nation scorned, and unjustly scorned, and her revenge took the form of defying and denying the principle upon which the Latin-Western tradition rested – that there were universal truths that faith or reason, or both together, could reveal, demonstrate, establish.

An economic interpretation of German romanticism and particularism is of course not compromised by this: the consequences of the crunching of Germany by the French in the seventeenth century were not confined to the realm of ideas or intellectual hegemony. Economic backwardness and political oppression played their part in at once creating an acute craving for personal freedom, and, since political freedom seemed beyond the range of possibility, turning this craving into a passion that was inner-directed, so that true freedom, as in the days of the collapse of the Greek city-state and the Roman domination of Judaea,

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

became identified with the inner life, which no circumstances and no tyrant could reach or desecrate or destroy.

There is of course always a certain flavour of sour grapes about an attitude that views what cannot be attained as not worth striving for. It was well for the French or the English to concern themselves with problems of self-government on the frontiers of public authority; for the Germans this was not a practicable possibility; hence the anguished retreat into the inner citadel of the spirit in which that kind of freedom, and indeed even serenity of spirit, could be obtained which is found among children and in prisons and under foreign occupation, where the external world is in any case uncontrollable and men are drawn towards one another, towards personal values and personal relationships and the creative activities of private life, by the wall that has been erected to exclude them from the outside world.

Be that as it may, Kant's notion of freedom rests upon the belief that morality is unintelligible without the possibility of free choice on the part of individuals to determine themselves this way or that. To the degree to which man is involved in the world of inexorable cause and effect, that is, the physical universe, and that also of the emotions – psychology is a causal science like any other – he is made to be what he is by forces over which he has no control; and therefore cannot in any true sense be said to be responsible for his acts, or indeed to be acting at all if by action is meant self-determination in accordance with choice not conditioned by uncontrollable factors. Where is he free then? He is free as a chooser of ends and of means. The precise differentia between man and the rest of the universe consists in his ability not merely to understand and generalise but to act; action entails choice between genuine equally open alternatives; a man is free if he determines himself and is not determined by others, either other men or other things; if he is to be conceived as an object wholly governed by laws that determine the behaviour of three-dimensional objects in space, together with emotions that obey similar laws, there is no sense in which he is freer than a beast or a plant. Beasts and plants are not human, if only because nobody attributes to them any responsibility for their behaviour; the same applies to sub-rational or irrational human beings, who are not regarded as responsible.

Man creates his own values: that is what is meant by calling him autonomous and not heteronomous. To obey values that exist

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

independently of him and which he cannot help being determined by – as hedonists believe, say, that men cannot help pursuing pleasure and avoiding pain – is to behave like an object in nature. Man chooses his ends, and not merely his means; to the extent to which these ends are ends only in so far as he chooses them – and nothing else could be meant by ends – he is their author. If one is to sacrifice a human being to something, this something must needs be higher in the moral order than the being which one sacrifices; and if man is the author of his own ends there is no entity in the universe morally superior to the moral consciousness that is the source of values, and not merely their implementer.

It is for this reason that Kant denounces the treatment of men as means. Means to what? Since all men equally possess a moral consciousness, there is nothing in the values chosen by any one of them that make those values intrinsically superior to the values chosen by others, in virtue of which these others may be sacrificed to a given individual or group. Hence the fiery indignation with which Kant denounces exploitation or degradation of other men as the worst of all transgressions against the moral law. There may be other forms of evil – cruelty or cowardice or hatred – but the vices that Kant castigates beyond all others are those that cause one human being to be directed by another, which causes him to be deprived of opportunity of choice, whether in the form of inequality, oppression, humiliation, or even in that of a benevolent paternalistic regime which, however much it may do for the prosperity or security of a population, makes the source of their status and their personal self-esteem depend on some external agent: the king, the government, the priesthood. To deprive a man of the possibility of determining himself freely, whether for good or for evil, is to dehumanise him. This is an absolute denial of that which makes men men, it is a lie in theory and subversive of everything that makes life worth pursuing in practice. It is this that makes grovelling so much more hateful than, say, theft. In both cases you are using other men as means to your gratification, but in the first case you openly encourage an order that denies humanity to men.

This is the deepest conviction and the most original thesis in Kant's moral and political philosophy. The fact that his own political theory falls short of the logical implications of his own moral doctrine is irrelevant, in that it merely casts a sad light on his own political timidity. What influenced others was the kernel of

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

the moral philosophy. That is what transformed political ideas as well as moral attitudes. It follows from Kant's doctrine of freedom – which has its roots in Luther and Rousseau, and the Stoics also, and certainly in the pietists of German Protestantism with its exclusive emphasis on the autonomy of the inner life – that only he was free who obeyed inner laws of his own making. To obey the laws made by others, whatever advantage may accrue from this, was to render oneself a slave.

The proposition that only self-imposed laws were valid was a sharp break with the previous outlook, whereby the authority of a law or a moral principle derived not from the subject but from its roots in the great objective establishment of the world – *rerum natura*, nature, which was as it was and must needs be obeyed, *Deus sive natura*, the great systematic order of things, the objective establishment pursuing goals either imposed on nature by the Creator or issuing from the character of things themselves.² This for Kant was enslavement. Hence the sharp turning-away from the doctrine that man must follow nature, study her, learn from her; from the complex of concepts in which nature was called Dame Nature or Mistress Nature, with which the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries are filled, towards the notion, on the contrary, of nature not as a model, departure from which is depravity and vice, but as a challenge: the ancient opposition of grace and nature reproduced at a secular level. Nature now appears as dead matter, stuff to be moulded by the only free creature in the universe – man.

It is by forfeiting one's capacity for choice that one becomes assimilated to an animal or a thing, an element in nature; by expressing one's specific essence as a human being, one is a maker and a doer; and to do or make is to impose one's will on nature or on other men. To impose it on other men is to treat them as if they were mere material – for Kant, the ultimate sin. To impose it on nature is to fulfil one's own nature or character as a man – to do what reason commands and not accept what one is liable to become if one offers no resistance to physical or emotional forces. To be a man fully is to do, act, resist, create, shape things into the patterns commanded by one's inner reason; above all, not to drift or to be ordered by others or by things, or to represent oneself as choosing when one is in fact being chosen for, as an independent

² [What in this case was the role of God in Kant's system?]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

human being when in fact one is at the beck and call of men and circumstances.

This proud doctrine obtains a new voice in Fichte. 'To be subject to law means to be subject to our own insight ... It means the right of a man to follow only his own insight ... This is violated by coercion.' 'Man shall determine himself and never allow anything foreign to himself to determine him; he should be what he is because he wills it and ought to will it.' 'Man may not make any reasonable being either virtuous or wise or happy against his own will.' Freedom is 'to rule over nature according to a man's own laws'. Happiness is a mere adjustment to external objects – the abdication of one's power to choose – a self-dehumanisation which goes against what every man, if he reflects, knows to be the end for the sake of which, at his best, he lives and does what he does.

Man has not chosen to be capable of choice, but he finds himself capable of it, and to abandon it is to maim himself and deliberately turn himself into an object. This runs against the categorical imperative – to act rationally – the awareness of which makes a man the moral being that he is. For this categorical imperative no authority is required or can be found; it is ultimate; indeed, to be justified by it is precisely what being an end in itself or an ultimate value is. It is, as it were, self-guaranteeing, self-grounded; even to question its authority, according to Fichte, is already the beginning of immorality. To analyse, to probe the foundations of morality – the authority of the great imperative that orders one to 'be and do something'³ in the world – is in itself subversive.

This very un-Kantian approach heralds the authoritarian element in Fichte's doctrine. But this is not to be found in his early philosophy. There the main principle is that man must act, that he is action, that he is not a static entity like a stone or even an animal, but a process, a constant series of acts of choice and self-determination in accordance with principles which he does not derive from outside but identifies with his own being. Rousseau is criticised for not teaching his pupil in *Émile* enough 'energy,

³ All references are to *Fichtes Werke*, ed. Immanuel Hermann Fichte (Berlin, 1971; a photographic reproduction of *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Berlin, 1845–6), with the addition of *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's nachgelassene Werke*, ed. I. H. Fichte (Bonn, 1834–5)) (hereafter SW), by volume and page, thus: SW vi 383.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

ardour, and firm determination to war against nature and to subdue her'. That is what choice is – moulding, creating, doing. Everything is vulgar and ignoble that robs man of respect for himself, of faith in himself and his purposes. The worst of all fates would be to give in to others in order to save his skin, in order to live a peaceful life. There are plenty of men bound by unworthy considerations – Philistines – against whom a free man must be perpetually on his guard. 'I have chosen the system I have now adopted ... not because I must; I believe it because I will.'⁴ Only then am I free and responsible.

Mere cognition faces me with facts that I cannot reject; but not to reject is not to be free. Will, and not cognition, is quintessential to man. 'I am not determined by my end: I determine each value, I create values – they do not simply appear before me like fixed and unalterable stars.' 'I do not hunger because food is before me: it becomes food because I am hungry.' The image is not that of a world that has its own nature, which I cannot alter, before which I stand and which I can at best understand, describe, predict and adjust myself to. The image is that of a world which presents itself to me, in any individual case, in accordance with the concepts and categories that I employ: the world of an energetic and brave man is a different world from the world of a passive and cowardly one – literally different. No doubt some things are the same – the cognitive categories examined by Kant determine the causal sequences, the material objects; but morally it is I, my demands, my intentions, my purposes, my system of moral goals, that determine what the world, as a theatre of potential action, looks like to me. And this, doubtless, will be different for men at one historical period rather than another, for their moral intentions may well be different.

It is in terms of these dynamic categories that Fichte defined man, and not simply as a Lockean cash-register which mainly records whatever is impressed upon it from outside. 'The kind of philosopher one is depends on the kind of man one is.' Philosophy is not contemplation, it is an activity. The central Fichtean notion is the *Anstoss* – the collision between myself and nature. I am conscious of myself not as a contemplator – if my activities are unimpeded I am scarcely conscious of myself at all – but as someone acted upon by outside forces which, in the search for the

⁴ SW ii 256 [inaccurate].

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

realisation of my own goals, I seek to subdue and shape and appropriate. Freedom, as later for Hegel, consists precisely in making my own, in making myself free of, in using and transforming and assimilating into my subjective texture.

This conception may well seem to lead to complete subjectivism. If every man seeks to shape things in accordance with his own untrammelled will, conflict and collision with other men seem inevitable, and this itself is a source of frustration and unfreedom. Kant sought to overcome this by maintaining that since reason is the same in all men, and only emotions divide them (following in this respect Rousseau's doctrine), what any rational man determines as the right rule of action must necessarily be so for all other rational men. This still rests on the old rationalist presupposition that there is an objective answer to the question 'How should we live?', only I discover it by looking within my own rational nature, and if the answer is correct I know it to be correct for other rational men also; for it cannot be that two rational men who ask themselves the same question can give two correctly obtained answers that collide with one another.

For Fichte this harmony is guaranteed by the fact that when he speaks of 'I' or 'self' he means, as a rule, not the empirical human being – the creature of flesh and blood who lives in time and space and obeys the laws of causality – but a transcendent entity, the rational self that is the same in all men. Occasionally this transcendent self functions as a kind of rational soul of all creation, of which individual men are mere sparks seeking union with the central fire; at other times it is simply a synonym for some kind of deistic god. It is by looking within my soul for that innate self which represents this transcendent, transpersonal, non-empirical, eternal, immortal self that I am most truly myself. Since this self is self-identical and the same in all men, what it wants or does cannot lead to contradiction, for it is single and, being rational, is not divided against itself.

This mystical vision theoretically solves Fichte's problem. But the effect of his eloquence and the force of his moral argument rested not upon attributing freedom, self-determination, spontaneity, creative power to a transcendent self outside the empirical universe with which men came into relationship only in comparatively rare moments in a mystical rising above their earthly selves; it achieved its effect by awaking in men the feeling that, since they were empirical creatures, everyday men and women

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

possessed the power of choice, of self-determination, of moulding nature, of 'being something and doing something' in the universe. The categorical imperative spoke to individual human beings, not to a transcendent self outside space or time. So that if it is said that the later romantics misunderstood or misinterpreted Fichte, that no doubt is technically quite correct. But the effect of his words lay precisely in such misinterpretation – which, one may be allowed to think, did not really misrepresent whatever was truly original and new in the style and content of the new doctrine.

Fichte also had other ways out of his subjectivism. In examining the notion of the creative self, he comes to the conclusion in his middle years that the individual is so bound up through speech, communication, and moral and intellectual upbringing with other men that the true unit is not the individual but the group. During his individualist period he looked upon the State simply as a utilitarian device for keeping the ring for creative personal relationships – for the preservation of that degree of justice, peace, security without which men could not express their natures as they were intended to. But gradually he came to the conclusion that the real self was the group, that virtue consisted in the sacrificing of the individual self to the larger whole in which alone the individual could realise himself truly; that action was a social phenomenon; that nature can be fought only collectively. With typical impetuosity he declares, 'The group alone exists.'⁵ 'The individual does not exist: he must vanish, he must forget himself in the species'⁶ – resistance to which is irrational and therefore immoral. Sometimes 'humanity' and sometimes the State is defined as 'the organised and self-organising whole – the creation of reason'.

It is at this stage that his thought becomes fused with that of the historicists such as Herder and his followers, who looked upon cultures as organisms with a physiognomy as unique and individual as that which had hitherto been ascribed to particular human beings. For Herder, who, like Fichte, believes that the natural function of human beings is to express themselves, to impress their personality upon inanimate nature, to speak to others, to create – for whom works of art are not [transcriptions?],⁷ however

⁵ SW vii 37-8.

⁶ SW vii 35 [approx.?).

⁷ [Word omitted.]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

inspired, of some divine original, as taught by the Platonic tradition, nor produced in order to embellish or to give pleasure or provide for normal human needs, but instruments of self-expression – for Herder, the cultural unit (which he speaks of sometimes as race, sometimes as [nation?]) is a group of [individuals?]⁸ connected with each other by material and spiritual ties which give all their acts a family resemblance, in virtue of which they express a particular cultural or national soul or pattern. What distinguishes Germans from Chinese is not that they inhabit a particular territory or obey common laws or own common ancestors or are commanded by a common monarch, or even that they speak a common language, although this is the most important of all criteria. What makes them Germans is that there is about every one of their conscious acts, their physical movements, the way in which they write, their legal systems and their folk-songs, their philosophy and the manner in which they dress themselves, their religion and the way in which they rise and sit down and make war and marry – there is about these processes a certain inner pattern which makes of all these actions something interrelated, which goes by the name of ‘German’, and this single pattern differs in specifiable ways from the similar pattern that is described as ‘Chinese’.

When Fichte says to the German nation in the thirteenth *Address to the German Nation*, ‘The inner frontier drawn by the spiritual nature of man first gives rise to outward frontiers and territories ... Men who live enclosed by certain mountains and rivers are in no way a people because of that, but, on the contrary, men live together protected by mountains and rivers ... because they were a people before that ... as a result of a far higher law of nature’, the law he speaks of is this organic pattern which for Herder, who was a Christian, is brought into being by God himself. The notion of a culture or a nation as the fulfilment of the individual comes only by identifying myself with that pattern to bring out the best that is in me and realise myself most richly and most freely. That conception of the organic community – which has much in common with that of Burke, but is nevertheless a good deal less political in character – fuses with Fichte’s notion of the autonomous human being as the subduer and transformer of nature into the combined concept of reality as whatever is most

⁸ [Word(s) omitted in these 2 places.]

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

individuated, least general, that which presents the aspect of a personality, of a creative individual people or culture which has a recognisable face and flavour and tone and pattern uniquely its own. The understanding of history is empathy into precisely such individual essences of cultures in the past. Lavater and his physiognomic individualism lent itself easily to the analysis of human beings into unique patterns, uniquely creative, producing unique works of art which expressed their own inimitable personality, for which nothing else could be substituted.

The dramatist Schiller, in his youth a faithful pupil of Kant, gave this doctrine a new twist. He too distinguished the individual human being from nature, and for him the true individual was a member of the 'kingdom of freedom', what he and his followers constantly referred to as the 'true person', the 'free person', the 'moral self'; the man in the 'state of spiritual freedom' or 'rational freedom' is the man who masters his fate and rises above it. Nature is amoral, if anything hostile to men. The most human activity in man is to win a victory over nature, to resist whatever in her pulls one down and assimilates one to her dead mechanical substance. Happiness may well consist in adjustment to nature and in stilling one's creative impulse, one's desire to dominate her and to suffer in the process; very well then, it follows that happiness and human worth do not coincide, indeed they may not be compatible at all – there may be a disharmony of nature and freedom. Man is a creator; that means that his acts are free; they interrupt the casual treadmill by which everything else is ruthlessly and inexorably determined. As creatures of reason we are above all independent. 'We feel independence of the Almighty – since not even he can destroy our autonomy or determine our will against our own principle.' Nature is indifferent to morals; she is not a guide, as she is to countless preachers in the eighteenth century; on the contrary, like Prometheus we must hurl ourselves against her and compel her to submit.

Where can we find true freedom, true escape from the necessity imposed by causal laws? Kant speaks of the fact that if we legislate for ourselves, then the obligations we impose on ourselves leave us free, for it is we who impose them and not others. Nevertheless, to face stark obligations, to face the grim categorical imperative that gives us no alternative course of action, even though we ourselves recognise its rationality, is a form of coercion. Self-coercion is still a kind of coercion. The only region in which Schiller finds true

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

freedom, not only from sensuous causation, but even from the restrictiveness of moral judgements, the limitation of our will to the narrow single track of duty, is art. 'All other things must: man is the being that wills.' The will is free to go against anything – against duty, against nature, against virtue – it should not seek what is bad, but it can, and in this ability lies its true freedom. Medea, when she kills her children, although she may be a bad woman because she chooses what is evil, nevertheless chooses: the act of choice makes her a being higher than those who simply give in to their inclinations, however virtuous. Independence is of the essence of man; habit, however needful, is what he has in common with dead nature.

All his life Schiller struggled to reconcile the freedom that he thinks the artist has in the creation of works of art – in which he is trammelled by nothing but his own fantasy, which is free – with the political necessities of a modern State. On the one hand, the only true freedom that we know is when we get away from *Stofftrieb* or *Naturzwang*, the necessities of material nature, and even from *Formtrieb*, the necessity imposed upon one by laws, symmetries, the necessity for generalising our intellectual and moral and political experience into principles of logic, of law, of politics – when we get away from this, away from the *Nothstaat*, the State founded on coercion, towards true freedom. This we will obtain in the *Spieltrieb*, in play. When we play we are what we want to be. In life we may be compelled to act thus or thus by our physical natures, by our emotions, by the pressure of political tyrants, by a thousand and one causes and factors over which we have but imperfect control. But when I play I am free; if I choose to imagine myself as a red Indian, I am to that degree a red Indian – here I am guided by ends of my own making, not even by general moral laws that bind all rational men equally, but by whatever inspired shape, whatever creative impulse I choose to realise because it expresses my own innermost essence, because it is my voice speaking.

Art, for Schiller, is not the production of objects that have their own independent worth, cut off from their author. For him, art is communication, and communication is a man, a human being, speaking: speaking and responsible for what he is saying. He sought in the realm of harmonious art, particularly Greek art, for a reconciliation of the claims of the material world – that is, of the laws that govern the matter out of which art is created – and the

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

principle that I myself impose upon it; for some form of harmony between the two that both obeys the laws of nature and leaves me free to shape out of them what I wish.

I cannot here go into the question of how far his aesthetics solved the problems that he set himself. But in politics he created the notion of freedom as a special prerogative of the artist or the creator: the free creator is one who does not submit to specific rules and maxims; he gives himself the laws of his own activity. This sentiment was echoed enthusiastically by Jacobi, perhaps the most unbridled of the romantics, and it fitted with the doctrines of the celebrated Schelling, in whose metaphysics the entire universe is a vast self-creative act, a kind of divinity that constantly grows by inventing itself, in which both spirit and matter are aspects of a self-realising (ultimately spiritual) entity which adopts many shapes as it seeks to reach consciousness of its own creative, forward thrusting, self-forming activity. It is a mystical conception of the universe as a living being, the history of whose search for self-awareness is the history of the most conscious elements of itself, namely men. Creation is the insight that the most developed elements in mankind, individuals or groups, have into the part that they themselves play in this great organic process in which they are involved as elements. The world is an act of perpetual creation, without rules, for its goals are self-created. It is a development from a dark chaotic will – blind and unconscious – towards luminous self-conscious reason. History is a kind of self-psychoanalysis of the human race. Art begins in the dark layers of unconsciousness and savage myth and custom and moves toward the light. All reality is a huge thrust of the will in some stage of the incarnation. Poets understand reality better, in some sense, than politicians because they are engaged in and aware of the true essence of what goes on, namely the inner act of creation in which they are the most aware and self-conscious participants. They take part in this great vital urge in a more conscious manner than others, who merely drift along the surface.

This is nothing other than the application of an aesthetic model to human development. Whereas previously other models had been used – Plato's geometric model or Aristotle's organic one, or the mechanical models of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, or that of the family, or a thousand and one other analogies – here intoxication with the freedom of the artist in the course of the creation of a work of art overcomes other analogies.

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

Sometimes the individual, but at other times the State, is represented as this creator. The Crusades, for Fichte, are the expression of its inner power on the part of the Christian soul. 'The absolute State is in its form ... an artistic institution set to direct all individual powers to the life of the race.' The analogies are now musical and religious. The world is a work of art eternally creating itself; it is God in the making, an evolutionary creative force.

What principles, then, may we derive from this? What laws? What propositions can we deduce or infer with regard to how men should live in society? Why, none. Suppose you were to ask yourself: Where is the song before the singer has sung it? Where is the symphony before the composer has composed it? Where is the painting before the painter has put it on canvas? In his imagination, you will say, but even this will not be true, for he imagines it as he creates it – he does not necessarily conceive it fully at first and merely by mechanical act transfer it to canvas or to paper. In any case, you may equally well ask the question: Where is it before it enters his imagination? Nowhere. Creation is necessarily creation out of nothing. To discover is to discover something which is there whether you discover it or not. But to invent is to invent something which before your invention did not exist.

So too, then, with politics. The State fit for human beings to live in will be invented by the concentrated and organised use of those creative faculties which invent their own principles and their own ends in a creative act. This is indeed a revolutionary consequence. In Fichte, in Schelling there is still perhaps some objective criterion for what is true invention and what is not, in the shape of some world spirit or transcendental self, such that we are all emanations of what is single, authoritative and divine. But once we get away from this model and the analogy with art is conceived too vividly, the justification of political action becomes analogous to that of a work of art. Napoleon, who dominates the age, is admired not for creating the Napoleonic Code or being competent, rational or even a successful general. He is admired because he is a great artistic creator who uses human beings as painters use paint, and composers use sounds. The figure who dominates the age symbolically is Beethoven, who sits in a garret, dirty, unkempt, bad-mannered, ignorant, barbarous in political and mundane matters, stupid, of no particular interest – but who is

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

true to the inner vision within him, does not sell out, is permitted to be rude to great men, fierce and indeed egoistic in his personal relationships, provided that this egoism is an instrument for sacrificing all his inner resources to serving the ideal that burns within him and which alone he is not permitted to betray. If he were to betray that and do something to accommodate himself to the external world, that indeed would be treason to that which is most holy in man, the ideal of free creation by rules and towards goals invented by himself.

In the case of Beethoven this may be harmless enough. But when it is carried forth into politics then Napoleon is the Beethoven of the social world – and he uses men as Beethoven uses sounds. Men are then divided by the romantic philosophers of the age into those great creative persons who are able to construct something in accordance with their unfettered will, and those lesser personalities, uncreative themselves, who can contribute to the goal that is the most sacred goal of man – creation, making his voice heard, saying his own word to the world – only by allowing themselves to be used as material by persons more creative than themselves. This may involve torment to them and indeed the extinction of their own individual selves, but in the extreme form of this doctrine it is regarded as the only service that ‘passive’ human beings can render to the task that only the active, who stand for the highest and most richly developed principles in man, can perform.

Here we have lost sight of objective truths which may be discovered by this or that approved means. Each nation, each unit – Church, race, culture, class, group, and, in extreme cases, individual – now formulates its own goals, which flow out from its own creative personality and to which the imposition of any rules derived from elsewhere, from another culture or the past or those principles which are allegedly timeless and absolute, will act as a mere obstacle and perversion. Goals are no longer discovered; they are no longer a form of knowledge; they are made, created, invented. Self-expression is now the watchword. But in that case, whatever may express one personality may well clash with that which expresses another, and that which may express one race or nation may well be incompatible with that which expresses another. But there is no hope, collision is inevitable. Any attempt to compromise, to try to work out a pattern in which these goals can be peacefully realised – perhaps not in full measure, but by

THREE TURNING-POINTS 3: ROMANTICISM

yielding so much to one another – is excluded, because that means the oppression of the untrammelled, creative spirit of a man, of a Church, of a race, of a culture, or of whatever is regarded as the carrier of values. Oppression in the name of what? In the name of something which, being external, he or they or it cannot possibly accept as being a criterion of values, or a valid standard, inasmuch as it is not an intimate part of his or its own unique creative process.

To this it came: as a result of the imposition of an aesthetic metaphor upon politics – the analogy of the great statesman as an artist, the justification of whose work lies in some kind of inner aesthetic logic that confers validity on the work of art as the expression of the fullest powers of his time or his race or his culture, as against some kind of universal principles which all men at all times (or, at any rate, most men at most times) are prepared to accept – there arose those movements of our own time, such as existentialism, emotive ethics and the like, which originated from the bankruptcy of theories of the objective validity of political standards, of natural law, and of the proposition that in politics, as in other regions of human experience, truths could be discovered by rational or other means which, once discovered, could be exhibited as true, and received as such, by other men using identical methods.

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