

## ROMANTICISM, POLITICS AND ETHICS

*This is a lightly edited transcript of the text of the 1963 Keller Lecture, given by Berlin in West Hartford, Connecticut. No attempt has been made to bring it to a fully publishable form, but this version is posted here for the convenience of scholars.*

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

It is not very often that large shifts of consciousness occur among human beings. When I speak of 'shifts of consciousness' I do not mean new answers to old problems. Newton gave new answers to old problems about the nature of the universe, but the problems remained the same – they did not alter. It was merely that far better answers were produced, with a consequent alteration, for example, in our attitude towards the external world, and the birth of certain new natural sciences. When I speak of a 'shift of thought' I mean that the whole attitude toward the world, the concepts and the categories, in terms of which people think are in some way extraordinarily transformed. Old questions are not answered, but disappear. New questions appear, and questions which appeared of urgent importance before become dissipated and can scarcely be understood.

I do not wish to enlarge upon this, because it would take me too long, but it has something to do with the fact that human beings think in terms of some sort of model. To explain something to yourself is usually to try to think of it as being like something else. When people ask central questions in politics and ethics, for example 'Why should anybody obey anybody else, rather than

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disobey them?’ – which is perhaps the central question in politics – or ‘What are rights?’ or ‘What is liberty?’ or ‘What are the purposes of life?’, or more specific questions such as ‘Are republics better than monarchies?’ or ‘What does it mean to say that there are natural rights as against artificial rights?’ and questions of that type, which are traditional in politics – when people ask these sorts of questions, the tendency is to try to answer them in terms of something more familiar. For example, in Plato’s day there was an attempt to explain the nature of society by analogies with geometry, about which something was known. Aristotle tried analogies with biology. Other people at later times tried analogies with, for example, the law, and so we get the theory of the social contract. Or you said: No, this is not right, the relationships between human beings are not like the relationships between persons governed by the same laws; they are more like relationships between members of a family. And other theories sprang up to explain that relationships between people in society are more like relationships between brothers and sisters than they are between, let us say, a man who sells a house and a man who buys it. This again, although it cast a certain amount of light on what it was meant to explain, turned out to be some kind of strait-jacket, and people felt that it too was inadequate in some way. And so new models spring up and you say: No, no, it is not like this – it is more like that. It is not like a family, it is rather more like something else. The relations of the State and its citizens are more like, say, those in the liberal theory. The State really is a kind of policeman: that is, all it is meant to do is to prevent collisions and to look after property. And then other people said that it cannot be a policeman. We feel a certain amount of loyalty to the State; nobody feels loyalty to a policeman. And the whole history of human thought is really an attempt to use one model after another for the purpose of elucidating something which appears to be obscure. When a big model disappears or crumbles, or is felt to be in some way unilluminating, and some other model takes its place, a large shift in consciousness occurs. It seems to me that something of this sort occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, and that this has made an enormous difference to thought and feeling.

Now let me be more specific. Until, roughly speaking, the middle of the eighteenth century, from, let us say, Plato onwards, for something like two thousand years, certain assumptions were

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made about human behaviour of a very simple kind. People thought, first of all, that the questions of how to live and what to do were capable of true answers, like any other questions. If it was said, 'Why should we live like this rather than like that?' someone must have the answer. There were a great many differences about what the answer was, and there were a great many differences about who knew the answer. Some people thought, for example, that the answer was discovered by the priests; that it was to be found in certain sacred writings or by the interpretation of those writings by certain accredited Churches. Other people said that the answers were to be discovered in laboratories by scientists, because God does not exist, but is only a thing called 'nature', which is mechanical in character. Some people thought that the answers could be discovered only by certain experts who were good at finding out this kind of thing. Others said, on the contrary, that *any* man, by looking in his heart, could discover the answer: there are no moral and political specialists. There may be specialists in physics, there may be specialists in geography, but on matters of conduct – questions like 'What kind of life should we live?', 'What is justice?', 'What are rights?', 'What is the proper form of human government?' – any rational man is in principle able to discover the answers if his mind has not been clouded by ignorance and prejudice. Again, there might be differences of opinion about the types of question these questions are. People tried to distinguish questions of fact from questions of value.

Throughout this period, for over two thousand years, there was a general assumption that, doubtless, questions of fact could be answered in certain obvious ways. If you asked the question 'How tall is this tree?' you could measure it. If you asked the question 'How far is Constantinople from Timbuktu?' you did not know, but you knew how it could be discovered, or who the proper experts were whom you could ask. So in the case of questions of politics and ethics also. How should we live? What is right? What is good? What is freedom? Why is it desirable? Why is freedom better than slavery? Why is justice better than injustice? Why is equality better than inequality? And so on. To these questions, also, there must be some kind of true answer, which somebody or other must be able to find out. You might say that men were too stupid ever to find this out for themselves. You might say that there was original sin, because of which you would never discover the answer completely. You might say we do not know it now, but

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we knew it once upon a time when there was a golden age, but then there was a fall, and men no longer knew the answer. Or you might say we do not know yet, but a golden age is to come when we shall know. You might say we do not know this on earth, but we shall know it in heaven. But somewhere there must be an answer – somebody knows. If we do not know, our successors will know. If we do not know, at any rate God knows. Somebody knows – there is an answer, because if there is not an answer, then the question is not a question, there is something wrong, it is just a neurosis in that case, some kind of malaise on the part of human beings. A real question must be capable of having one true answer, all the other answers being false.

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

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

If you could discover the true answers to these questions – perhaps you would not be able to, for various reasons, because, as I say, you were too ignorant or because it was too difficult or the

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questions were too complex, or whatever it may be – if you could discover all the true answers and put them together, this would constitute a kind of global answer to the question of how life should be lived. It was a kind of jigsaw puzzle. If only you could put the bits together, there would be some kind of total answer, some kind of pattern in terms of which life could be arranged. And if you could so arrange life, then men would be happy and just and prosperous and truthful and free for ever. This was what was meant by saying that there was some kind of objective ideal towards which it was worth striving, which was presumably the same for all men, everywhere, at all times; for what is true must be true eternally and must be objective and capable of being known.

These three legs of this stool, so to speak, these three propositions – on which there are acute disagreements between people who may be divided by enormous differences, metaphysically, theologically, or in whatever way – these three propositions are common, I would aver, to the Western tradition. These three propositions were to some degree shattered by the romantic movement, and this is what created an immense and revolutionary change in our whole mentality.

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

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how to provide it, and this, after all, was simply the task of scientists and the sciences. All you needed to know was what men wanted and then how to give it to them. And this was the ideal of the rationalists in the eighteenth century.

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

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

The thing started in a comparatively innocent fashion. The chief culprit in this particular story is the very unromantic, severe, schoolmaster-like figure of Immanuel Kant, who certainly had no notion of what the consequences of his propositions were likely to be. And without embarking on a lengthy lecture on moral philosophy, which I have no wish to do, let me just say this. One of the things which Kant most deeply stressed was that if a man is truly to be called moral, then what he does must be an act of free choice on his own part. To call a man moral is to say that he openly, clearly and consciously chooses to do X rather than Y: because if choice is unreal, if men are determined, if I choose as I choose because the molecules in my body are such that I cannot help acting as I do, if I do what I do because the climate in which I live, the soil on which I live, and the circulation in my body, the

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

Therefore the centre of Kant's position was that what he called morality depends on the fact that a man chooses what he does freely and openly, and that he chooses and is not chosen for, that he is the author of his own acts. This is a very central proposition for him, because if I choose what I do simply because I am overcome by passion, then I am behaving like an object – I am simply caused to behave as I do, and I am not being free. If I do as I do because I am under the spell of emotions, because some psychologist could predict how I was likely to behave from examining me, in the way in which physicists examine stones, or zoologists examine horses, then it makes no sense to say that certain acts are right, other acts are wrong, some are praiseworthy, some are blameworthy, which is a proposition which we all believe. From this it followed, for him, that the most important thing in human beings was this capacity for freely choosing evil, as well as good. It was creditable to choose good only because we deliberately refrained from evil. If we could not help refraining, then there was nothing particularly praiseworthy about choosing what was good. This is the heart of Kant's philosophy. The thing which he keeps on stressing is that men create their own values. Because men create their own values, they follow these values because they freely choose them. We live the lives we live because we determine ourselves to do it freely, when we might have chosen otherwise. If this is really true, then to use other people as means, that is to say, to be paternalistic, to give people what you think is good for them, without putting them in a position where they can freely choose that which they want – to treat grown-up human beings as children, for example – that is the most heinous of all crimes which human beings can commit.

Kant, no doubt, like other moralists, disapproved of cruelty or injustice, or other things which are regarded as vices. But far more than cruelty or injustice he disapproved of that which he regarded

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as the most monstrous of human attitudes, which is degradation or humiliation of other human beings, treating other human beings as means towards your ends, putting other human beings into a condition of some kind of slavery, using them for the purpose of obtaining not the ends which they are entitled to choose freely but the ends which you choose, the ends which you in some way condition them into being means for. Hence all of Kant's rhetoric is directed against people who in some way get at other people, people who somehow condition other people, people who do what is nowadays called 'brainwashing', people who in some way treat other people as being unequal to themselves, as being mere instruments of their desires – because that, for him, dehumanises them. The most human part of human beings is this unique capacity for choosing, which is what material objects and animals lack.

Of course, if this is so, then a central aspect of being a human being lies in the fact that you choose certain values, and that is why you should not be sacrificed to anything other than what you would also choose. There was this great doctrine, which you will find in the eighteenth century in Rousseau and in Kant, that unless I am governed by laws which I impose on myself, I am a slave. This is quite different from previous views. Previously you thought that the moral laws which you ought to obey were objective – something created by God, or something created by nature, something which I discover out there in exactly the same way in which I discover trees or stones or anything else which is out there. The things to follow were some kind of objective principles, whether I know them or not. It is in the eighteenth century that you will first find this new note struck, to the effect that freedom consists of obeying laws which I impose upon myself. There is a real break here between people who think real laws are laws which I do not invent but which are out there whether I see them or not, and the attitude which says that if I obey laws which are not of my own making, which are of somebody else's making, then in some sense I am a slave. Hence the whole doctrine of democracy on the part of these thinkers, who say I must participate in making the laws which I obey, because if I do not participate in making them, then they are imposed upon me from outside, and I am being treated as an object, I am being treated as a thing, I am pushed around. This is the most ultimate degradation and humiliation, it is a denial of man's humanity, it is the worst and most dreadful thing



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which any human being can do to another. This is the heart of the whole of what might be called the moral democratic doctrine upon which modern democratic States rest.

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

Let me make this a little clearer. Take the concept of nature, which is essential here. The ordinary thinkers of the eighteenth century look upon nature as something to be imitated. Nature is a kind of model. There is this beautiful, divine harmony. In the Middle Ages it is a kind of natural hierarchy, with God at the top and the amoeba at the bottom, and the important thing is to discover where I belong in this natural hierarchy, which I have not made, but to which I belong. And if only I can discover where I belong in this pyramid, and proceed to function accordingly, then I shall be happy, I shall be just, I shall be good, because that is what I was made for by God or by nature. In the eighteenth century we do not get the notion of hierarchy, because they deny that there is some kind of great metaphysical structure, the idea of which arose, to some extent, because of a combination of Greek and Christian theology. But still, the notion of nature is paramount.

You find a lot of statements about Dame Nature, Mistress Nature. Nature is conceived of as a tyrant which forces you to do certain things, or as a kindly mother whose voice you must listen to. If only you would look at the way in which nature does things, if only you would sit in some quiet glade and observe cows browsing and streams flowing, instead of involving yourself in the corrupt life of sophisticated cities (according to Rousseau) – if you only did that, you would discover that there is a great natural

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harmony around you, and if only you could adjust yourself to this great natural harmony, you would be fulfilling your human nature in the way in which it was intended that it should be fulfilled. Intended by whom? Well, if you are a deist, then you believe in God. If you are an atheist, then you say 'nature'. But in all these cases there is some kind of purpose at work, which you can only discover, which is a purpose which is there whether you know it or not. And the important thing is to discover what this purpose is. Once you discover this purpose, you can switch yourself into the mechanism, you can adjust yourself to this objective harmony, and you then know that all will go well, because all pain, all suffering, all tragedy come from not understanding where you really belong. You were really born to be a flute player, let us say, and you insist on playing the violin. If you were born to be a flute player, then you will play the violin badly, you will be unhappy, you will interfere with the rest of the orchestra, things will go badly both for them and for you. The important thing is for you to discover what it was that you were meant to do. And if only you can discover by some kind of inspection – some people said by metaphysical means, some people said through the laboratory, some said by anthropology and sociology, others used other methods – if only you could discover in the proper way whatever part it was you were meant to play in the orchestra (which is a kind of simile or metaphor used at that time); if only you could discover, then you would find that it was really the flute that was meant for you, and if you played the flute you would realise that all the orchestra would be in harmony with you and all would be well. This is the notion.

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

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yourself to and becomes simply so much raw material, almost hostile, a sort of slag-heap, a mass of stuff which you constantly mould into the kind of pattern which you freely determine yourself, because if you do not freely determine it yourself then you are to that extent not being a moral being. And this is a tremendous shift.

When the notion that nature is not something to be imitated is attained, you slowly get another notion growing up. This is what I tried to speak about at the beginning, namely the replacement of one model by another. The scientists of the eighteenth century said nature is nothing but one vast mechanism and runs exactly like a machine, and the thing to do is to find out which particular cog, which particular wheel or lever you are in it – you or your society, your Church, your nation, your race, your profession or whatever it might be. Others were dissatisfied with the notion of mechanism and talked, let us say, about an organism. And they said that the relationships of men to one another were different from the relations of cogs or wheels, and were more like the relation of hands and feet and heart and liver and brain in the human body. Whatever analogy was used, someone thought one was better than the other, and gave reasons for it, and so on.

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

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

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

If you say 'Where is the symphony before the composer has written it?' and you reply 'Not anywhere', then you say 'What is this process, then? What is this symphony?' The symphony is an invention. The difference between 'invention' and 'discovery' is of great importance. Before the historical moment of which I speak, namely the last third of the eighteenth century, which is when the romantic movement originated, for present purposes – before that

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the whole emphasis lay upon the fact that out there there are truths, and it is very important to discover them. There is a structure to reality which some people are better at finding out about than others. And if only you can find out what this is – for example, that God exists or does not exist, that things have purposes or do not have purposes, that human beings need this or want that, or are made happy by this or are made unhappy by that – if only you can discover that, then and then only will you be all right.

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

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But if it is the case that values are not discoverable at all, that they are much more like something made – not found, but made, not discovered, but invented – then the whole picture changes, and you get this romantic model which says that life is much more like art than it is like nature. That is to say, if you say ‘What is good?’, good is that which human beings make out of their lives. Good is that towards which human beings direct their lives. What are these things towards which human beings direct their lives? These things are what human beings invent for themselves. These values are human precisely because people need not follow them, but follow them because they invent them for themselves. The German philosopher Fichte was perhaps the most consistent articulator of this doctrine, but it is to be found among almost every romantic of this age.

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

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

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

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

By the time you get into the nineteenth century, this was not at all the case. By the time you get to the nineteenth century, if there are two men, for example, who believe opposite things, supposing they are both affected by the romantic movement – if you have two men who believe opposite things and these things are not compatible, it is thought to be far nobler for one of these men to kill the other in a duel, say – either for A to kill B, or for B to kill A, or, best of all, for both to kill each other – far better than the most infamous of all solutions, which would be some feeble

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compromise. The one thing which is not allowed is that people should jeopardise or compromise their convictions. What is disgusting and regarded with extreme horror and nausea is the thought that in order to preserve your miserable life, you are prepared to admit, or are prepared to live as if, what you know to be true is not true. Far better for you to lose your life for what you believe, no matter what the odds, than that you should arrive at some squalid compromise simply for the contemptible purpose of preserving peace and order. This is the typical romantic attitude.

And so you have a new cluster of values which I do not think would have meant very much to men of a previous period – for example, integrity. Integrity is not something which anyone talks about before a certain date. For example, the whole worship of minorities, martyrdom, where you say failure is in many ways nobler than success. The typical holy man of this period is someone like Beethoven. Beethoven is sitting in a garret. He is allowed to be dirty, unkempt, rude, ignorant and barbarous. The only thing which he is not allowed to do is to sell out. The one thing which he must not do is fail to obey the inner voice which speaks to him, fail for the sake of popular applause, popularity, money, or any of the other kinds of wicked temptations which he has to resist. Otherwise it does not matter what he is. The whole figure of the lonely artist, the poor, unkempt, dirty, rude artist, sitting in a garret by himself, who has special rights, who is a kind of sacred object, because he is dedicated to a purpose within him – even if you disapprove of the purpose, even if you are not interested in the purpose itself – that is something brand new. And new concepts of this degree of power and influence are comparatively rare in the history of notions. You have a whole cluster of virtues, as I say. The whole idea of fighting, no matter what the odds, that it is somehow nobler to perish in a battle when you know somehow that you are going to be defeated in a kind of quixotic way, better to do that than to calculate the odds and say, ‘After all, if I am dead then I shall not be able to do anything at all, and I had better not be dead’ – this is relatively new.

During previous periods this could never have been said. The important thing was to get things right. The important thing was to find out what the universe was like and then adjust yourself to it and be happy and strong and successful. The idea that failure is in some ways better than success is surely something very new. The whole worship of failures, minorities and martyrs, the idea that



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minorities and martyrs are somehow more sacred than the big battalions, is apparently new. Again, you get the notion that motive is more important than consequences. You cannot guarantee that you will be happy, because that depends on external factors. If the whole moral value of an act depends upon what you yourself can do – on your free act of choice – the only thing you can be responsible for is your own motive. You cannot be responsible for the consequences. Therefore happiness is not such a worthy ideal, not so much because it is not desirable in itself, but because you cannot guarantee it. Since it is part of the external world, it is not part of the proper moral effort of a man. All you can be responsible for is that you will be pure in heart – that your motive will be sincere. What the consequences are is not in your power. And so you no longer get moral judgements in terms of consequences, which certainly was the case before – for everyone, Aristotle and everyone who followed. According to that model you said that human beings should achieve certain things, it does not matter what – works of art, certain political establishments, the victory of the Church, whatever it might be – the important thing is to succeed. Failure is never valuable in itself. You now say: Provided the heart is pure, provided the motive is good, provided he does not sell out, provided he is dedicated, provided he is completely free from any thought of betrayal, *that* is what gets you to heaven.

This of course arises to some degree out of Christianity, but it is a secularised form of it. Christianity – and all religions, in a sense – are in favour of martyrdom. But then you were a martyr to the truth. The important thing was that you died for something that was true, which was the most important thing in the world because it was true, and therefore salvation lay in it. The idea that it was right to be a martyr for something which might be true or might be false, but the value of which was that you chose it, that it happened to be an ideal that you dedicated yourself to, no matter what anybody else thought, no matter whether public opinion was in favour of it or not, no matter whether there was objective evidence of its validity or not – this is something comparatively fresh and original. And, as I shall explain, that is the heart of the romantic attitude to politics.

As I say, it is really a kind of Christian attitude, though Christianity lays stress on motives only because the motives are validated by the belief that God exists, that Jesus exists, that he

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said certain things, that there are certain things which are true about man and about God – if this is not true, then of course everything falls to the ground. That is why for Moslems to be doing this sort of thing was perfectly worthless. But by the time you get to the nineteenth century, you find the idea of the ‘noble enemy’. The noble enemy is better than a vacillating friend. It does not matter that he is an enemy; it does not matter that he believes the opposite of what you believe; it does not terribly matter what you believe – the most important thing is to die for it. In other words, your attitude of mind towards what you are fighting for is infinitely more important than the objective content of whatever it is you believe. This is brand new.

This is all right, this is comparatively harmless, when it extends only to the world of the arts, and you say that the ideal human being is someone like a painter or a composer who does not look at filthy lucre, who does not look at worldly success, who simply listens to the sacred voice within him and tries to make concrete that which it orders him to do. But when it applies to politics, certain more sinister consequences follow. If you suddenly apply it to politics, you begin saying: Well, not only paints, not only sounds, are materials out of which works of art can be made to which a man can dedicate himself, which he can freely determine himself to produce in accordance with an ideal which is sacred because it is his, and not because it is objectively valid – because that is what *he* is prepared to die for, which is all that matters. This could also apply to political issues. For example, Napoleon. Napoleon bound his spell upon the people of Europe not so much because he was a competent soldier, not because he was a successful emperor of the French, but because he was conceived of as a kind of supreme political artist, a great political creator, only his material happened to be human beings instead of paints and sounds. And just as the composer is free to mould sounds in whatever order he pleases, just as the painter is free to do whatever he likes with the colours and paints which he uses, so Napoleon demonstrated that it was possible to take human beings and to mold them freely into splendid new combinations. The State suddenly emerges as a work of art. Lots of things have been said about the State before. The State has been regarded as a traffic policeman, as an organic unity, as the full expression of human aspirations. All kinds of things have been said by Aristotle and by Thomas Aquinas, by Hobbes and by Locke, by Rousseau, by

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others, but the new notion of the State as a work of art rests upon the new model in terms of which things are explained, the new model being that you create values – you do not find them, you make them.

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

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

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allow myself to be the raw material for this splendid artistic creation. This is really the beginning of the whole thing.

Let me offer some quotations from the apparently harmless writings of Fichte – very few of them, to show the kind of thing he says. ‘I do not accept or suppose anything because I must, I believe it because I will.’ And again, ‘If man allows laws to be made for him by the will of others, he reduces himself to a beast, injures his inborn human dignity.’ ‘Man should be and do something.’ Man shall be a ‘quickenning source of life’, not an ‘echo’ or an ‘annex’, not a piece of driftwood, but someone who determines himself in a certain direction. And from this the whole romantic theory then proceeds. In other words, the proper analogy is with the arts, and not with the sciences. The proper thing is not to know, but to do.

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

The notion of tragedy too acquires a quite different dimension. Tragedy, hitherto, always rested on some kind of error; I kill my father unawares, if I am Oedipus; I kill my mother Clytemnestra, if I am Orestes, because she killed my father, and so forth, because I am in a certain state of mind, which on the whole is an erroneous state of mind – the gods have blinded me in a certain way. But if I knew the truth then I would not be doing these things. In other words, tragedy is always the result of some kind of ignorance, some kind of inability to cope, some sort of defect, which, in principle, is curable. But if ideals are not discoverable, if ideals are

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made, then this does not follow at all. Rather it will follow that it might well be the case that certain valid ideals are not compatible with certain other valid ideals. And here the romantics showed a certain insight, because before them nobody, perhaps, said, what indeed people tend to accept now, that it may be the case that there are certain ideals to which human beings dedicate themselves which are not compatible with certain other ideals; that justice is not wholly compatible with mercy; or that if I know everything, I may not be wholly happy, which was not accepted before – if I know that I have cancer, this will make me less happy than I am now – or that complete liberty is not compatible with complete equality; or that complete efficiency is not compatible with a total degree of individual freedom; or that power is not compatible with virtue; and so forth. The idea that there could be ideals some of which various people could variably seek, which would not be compatible with ideals that are equally valid, and that tragedy consists in the inevitable conflict of ideals which cannot be squared, whatever you may do, that there is a certain logical incompatibility, not just factual, not just resting on temporary or incurable ignorance, but on the essence of the thing itself, in terms of which certain good things might not be compatible with certain other good things – that is something which, I think, emerges only after the romantic movement.

The consequences of this are very peculiar in the present day. What do we ourselves believe? Suppose I ask whom we put higher in the moral scale: do we, for example, believe that someone like Frederick the Great, whose motives may have been highly corrupt, who was a cynic, an egomaniac, in ordinary terms a scoundrel, but who undoubtedly made a large number of Germans happier than they were before, made them more efficient, gave them more of what they wanted – would we say that Frederick the Great was better man or a worse man than, let us say, Torquemada? Let us assume that Torquemada was sincere: but he did torture a lot of innocent persons to death. And then you say: Torquemada's motives were perfectly pure, but the consequences were extremely painful, very disastrous and ruinous. Frederick the Great was, in the ordinary acceptations of the words, a dishonest, crooked, self-seeking, cynical, corrupt man. But the consequences of his acts undoubtedly bred order, justice, happiness and proficiency on the part of a large number of Germans, and probably affected Europe

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in a most excellent fashion. If we say this to ourselves, then which one of them scores higher? We are confused.

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

But now – today – it is not so certain, and we are heirs to both these points of view. We say, so much for motive, so much for consequences. We must reckon one, and we must reckon the other. This is a typical, curious, ambiguous condition which shows how much we have inherited from the romantic movement; the notion of idealism, for example, the notion that a man may do a lot of harm but that you really should not be too hard on him because his motives are pure, or because he meant well, is something brand new; the notion that minorities should be protected simply because they are minorities. Martyrs are worthy of respect because they are martyrs, even though the things to which they are martyrs may be, to you, absurd. This is, relatively speaking, new. There are certain insights which the romantics produced which undoubtedly have lingered with us to this day. For example, that men must not be slaughtered for the sake of abstract ideals, because men create their own ideals; or the notion that motive counts; or the notion that purity of heart is important; or the notion that no objective reasoning, no demonstration that reality is like this or like that – for example, that there is an inevitable pattern in history, or that it is clear that, whatever you do, the enemy will overwhelm you, therefore it is wiser to submit – that these arguments are not decisive provided you have some ideal of your own to which you are prepared to sacrifice your life; that it is in some way nobler to go to certain defeat, provided you are quite clear that this is what your life is dedicated to, than to scrap your ideal simply in order to align yourself with the big battalions of history. That is something which we have inherited from the romantics.

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

This is not so. Broadly speaking, you could say that if you found a human being all of whose moral convictions were such that it was impossible to communicate with him; if you found a human being, as in Hume’s example, who was prepared to destroy the entire world in order to cure a pain in his little finger; if you discovered this human being, you would not say that he had a code different from yours, that he had committed himself to an ideal different from yours, that he happens to be an existentialist who does not believe that there are metaphysical guarantees of anything, who simply believes in gratuitously committing himself to a certain form of life the reason for which is that he has committed himself – and there can be no other reason. You would not say that. You would say that a man who is prepared to destroy the world in order to cure a pain in his little finger is certifiable. And if you said that, you would mean that you would not regard as a normal human being someone who did not accept our core of common values; that part of what you mean by ‘human being’ is a certain common core of moral beliefs which most human beings,

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whatever their moral or political convictions might be, accept; and that unless they have these convictions, communication with them is impossible. And on the whole we define human beings, to some degree, in terms of being able to be communicated with. And this demonstrates that these so-called moral and political values are not arbitrary in the sense in which the romantics wished to make them. When they are arbitrary, they are not called moral. We do not dispute matters of taste. There we think it is all right for people to differ. It does not shock us. We think manners can be different. We think customs can be different. But the things about which we do not believe that differences can be too wide, though we recognise some, we specifically for that reason call moral. And we call them moral precisely because there is an implication that to be a human being at all is to accept certain forms of life, to accept, if you like, certain principles, in terms of which alone any human being can understand any other human being. This is the ultimate core of what might be called the natural law doctrine, though it can be interpreted in a very empirical or in a very sociological fashion.

But there is no doubt that the romantic movement made a big dent in the somewhat naïve acceptance of this view before the eighteenth century. The point about the romantic movement is that it for ever impressed upon the imagination of mankind the idea that too many rules, too many principles, really did not bind mankind; that there were exceptional persons; that if you asked a man why he behaved as he behaved, and if he answered, 'Because this is my ideal, because this is what I want to dedicate my life to, because this is how life looks to me, because this is the way in which I look at the world, this is what is sacred to me, this is that for the sake of which I am prepared to fight and, if need be, die' – if a man says that, what he is saying is not absurd, whereas before 1750 you would certainly have thought it absurd. You would have thought it as absurd as saying that twice 2 is 7, and that this is something for which I am prepared to die. And this is because you do not think that truth in moral and political matters is the same sort of thing as truth in scientific or factual matters. And this proposition, whatever its implications may be, I think the romantics have to a certain extent established even in our consciousness. And this, I think, is an enormous shift in European consciousness. The fact that we do pay attention to motive, the fact that we do think that sincerity and integrity are virtues in



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themselves, is something new. I do not say it is good; I do not say it is bad. I merely wish to argue that this whole cluster of virtues – idealism, integrity, dedication, all these words which we use so easily, including the word ‘creative’, which has become one of the most hackneyed words in the language, and which has come to mean practically nothing at all now – these words were brought into the world by the enormous shift in consciousness which the romantic revolution induced, and which seems to me to have altered the attitudes and actions of human beings, perhaps for ever.

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