Do you see yourself as a cultural pessimist or a cultural optimist? Or aren’t these categories very useful in relation to the human condition?

I suppose I’m an optimist on Mondays, Thursdays and Saturdays, and a pessimist on Wednesdays and Sundays. I haven’t got a philosophical position that justifies either optimism or pessimism. As I live them, anyway, these terms are more moods. They are of interest phenomenologically, but I don’t think the mood proves anything, and I don’t think anything proves the mood. We can feed a pessimistic mood with any amount of social observation, fact and pseudo-fact. And an optimistic mood can be fed also. I don’t actually think in those terms, and I can’t construct a stable linear view of history. History is so vast that my mind is completely boggled by the thought of all the different aspects of living that have gone into the human story so far. In what sense this is better than that, and how you can assess these against innumerable and continually changing factors, is beyond my mind to compute.

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A writer like Kafka seems to see the world as a prison without bars, as in many ways you saw the world of the schizophrenic in The Divided Self, or Beckett, who doesn’t seem to see any way out, or the early Sartre—we’re condemned to be free at the same time as being abandoned. We have all these parameters in our existence, within which we can act. I wonder whether you feel that there are various parameters of our existence which could be described as the human situation?

Whether our souls or minds have any sort of autonomy apart from our physical existence, we live our life in a physically mortal frame. One thing that is certain is death. What death is, however, seems to me an essential, baffling mystery. Apart from observing it (which only tells you what you see—it doesn’t tell you what it is that one is looking at), the only way we could possibly know about it is to remember having died. And some people say they do. But what people say is always open to a scale of plausibility and implausibility, possibility and impossibility, probability and improbability. And so, what one makes of what anyone says will fit into a scale of credibility.

My mind works the same way as in the existential frame that it is apparently in the nature of man to question his being. Man is the being whose being is in question to himself. It doesn’t look as though there are any other creatures that we’ve come across, except the human race so far, that have this peculiarity.

**What is your stance on the world—your take on it—what is it like today for you?**

My perspective is of the kind that I don’t have a model to which I can refer it. I can’t say it is like a prison, a womb, a tomb. I think it was Max Beerbohm from whom I first heard, “Life is a prison without bars.” If a metaphor did fit, then I wish it would come to mind! I would even justify my inability to say what the world looks like by arguing that it is in the nature of the world not to be “putable” into an object or an image that one can stand out of. There is no image that one can make, which is the totality of all images in the ground of the possibility of everything. You can’t put the infinite set of all into a model or an image that has a boundary on which one is on the outside looking. I don’t share the internal world, or the world that used to be for Giordano Bru-
no, and up to maybe the time of Galileo, of the world as a vast animal, all alive. I don’t feel it in terms of a schema of any particular spatial centeredness in the world that is related to any particular theological or existential significance.

I grew up with the idea of these vast infinite spaces of Pascal. I don’t feel alienated. I don’t feel I strayed into this universe by some mistake or absent-mindedly or for some reason I’ve forgotten. I feel quite at home, basically in harmony. But I’ve got a real sense of shuddering and terror at the way human life can turn on anyone. Things that can happen to people don’t look at all pleasant and I’m very thankful that in my life so far I’ve been spared a lot of terrible things that one actually encounters. As Sophocles said, “Terrible is life . . .” It’s not unmitigated. I don’t have a sense of a continued abyss of utter end or nihilistic dissolution of all significance and meaning of things that I value and cherish. I don’t know how to account for any of this universe. In reflecting upon what my position seems to be, I don’t see why we would expect to be able to account for any of it.

In Freud’s theory of civilization he claims that basically we are pretty narcissistic and what we want is satisfaction of the pleasure principle. But then, à la Hobbes, we unite for a better long term goal. Civilization is just a compromise. Freud does see human beings as not particularly lovely individuals. In many ways we are basically pretty destructive, as well as, of course, being creative.

Oh yes. I don’t recognize in the way I look at my fellow creatures and myself that I’ve hardened into a misanthropic stance. I’ve never gone through a period of catastrophic disillusionment, a soured or a jaundiced view of people. Freud claimed for himself that he had a “friendly attitude” to human beings. At the same time, he didn’t see why in any sense of the term that he could make any sense of, that you should be expected to love people at large, as he found many people quite unlovable. He disagreed with that injunction or command.

Also, in Civilization and Its Discontents, he brings up the short story by John Galsworthy “The Apple Tree.” A student on holiday in Wales has a brief romance with a farmer’s daughter, just before World War I. He is upper class, she a peasant. He goes back to fin-
ish his holidays in Brighton. Soon the girls with their tennis racquets and the rest of it capture his attention. He forgets about her completely. Many years later he happens to be on holiday in Wales. He remembers he had this affair there as a student and discovers that the girl committed suicide when he didn’t come back for her, as he had vowed he would. Freud said this story showed how simple natural human love is no longer possible in our civilization.

I don’t agree that you can culture out love. There is a lot to he said for one of the pleasant developments of our civilization. I am basing myself here, for instance on other people, social historians, like Louis Stone (in *Sex, Marriage and Family History from 1500–1800* with aperçus about the nineteenth century). He makes a very strong case that the development of our industrial civilization, money circulation and the dissolution of the romantically cherished structures that went 200–300 years ago opened out space for women and men to develop something like a friendly relationship to each other, to be able to look at each other, to choose each other out of personal taste to a considerable extent, to develop on their own avowal and take their destiny in their hands between themselves, to take the decision to live together if they wanted, to part if they wanted, to have children if they wanted. I like all that sort of thing. I am a sufficiently “corrupt” (I say that ironically) product of my times that I actually prefer the thought of living now than any other time I can think of. Just for the little time since the end of World War II in Europe, however long that is going to last, has been a remarkable period of comparative peace. Comparative, I mean, just in this particular location on the planet or anywhere where people haven’t got the knives out, or the helicopters, or the machine guns—where people have a chance to sit down and get on with living a peaceful life and making something of it, I mean, that’s the sort of place I would like to be.

But a lot of people would see you as a herald of a sort of non-alienated life to come in a totally different society. They’ve read The Politics of Experience and taken it that we are all half-crazed, half people in a really crazy world. Is there a question of being misunderstood?
I suppose it depends on the tone of voice in which one says that, and the look in the eyes—whether it is said in a frenetic, frantic way or whether it is said in some other tone of voice. If we take the world’s well-known spiritual teachers from the Buddha to the Judeo-Christian tradition, to the Greek tradition and the Islamic tradition, it’s said all over the place that most people by any rigorous standards are pretty daft. We don’t give any credit to even the state of mind of people—our own great-great-great-grandparents—we think we have to make allowances for it, they didn’t know any better. Have a look at how many women were burned a year in Europe for years—only about 20 generations back—apparently about 100,000 a year is a low conservative estimate out of a population of about 6,000,000. An incredibly large number of women were picked up in the middle of the night from their beds, trundled along in carts at 3 am—it could happen here or anywhere—these guys were going around picking up women and putting them into dungeons and torturing them and burning them. Any student in the first year of a philosophical course is expected to begin to realize that the unreflective ordinary state of mind, as soon as one looks upon it, is practically bound to discover innumerable, epistemological errors—deep programmed epistemological errors—so I don’t think I’m saying anything unusual there.

You have been taken as that, though, haven’t you?

I was taken by quite a lot of people who raved. The educated people divided into two camps over The Politics of Experience. Some of them who were on the inner side of education knew the echoes, resonances and reverberations of what I was saying. But they deeply resented that thousands of people read that in that form for the first time—that was their introduction to all that. They read me before they had read Sartre or Hegel or before they had even heard of Kierkegaard, or before they had ever thought of reading Plato or Aristotle. Psychoanalysts did not like the idea that thousands of intelligent students were reading for the first time (at fourteen or earlier) these thoughts about Freud or psychiatry before they had read anything else, getting misled and misinformed and led astray. And the other side of those people
who were positioned to make that critical judgment loved it, of course. They liked that because they felt my point of view was sympathetic with theirs.

*You actually did chime in with the mood of the 1960s, characterized by the Dialectics of Liberation Conference.*

Yes. Most of *The Politics of Experience* was written in the late 50s and early 60s, and given in lectures, in professional and academic circles. Then, without me knowing that it was happening, a whole year of American college students picked it up and it became a campus best-seller. Well, it never had that fate anywhere else. And of course since the Americans with their *Tibetan Book of the Dead*, Tim Leary and then *The Politics of Experience*—it was all over the world. The American students, what could they have read like that? Herbert Marcuse is not the same as that. He’s not an existentialist, he is a Marxist-Freudian.

Sartre had never got to that generation in America and Camus was now too old for them. So here was quite a young guy in his thirties just writing. But all this passed me by. I didn’t realize it had been happening until I came back from India. I realized that for 3–4 years there must have been a lot of stirring up of all sorts of issues that people were debating and that my contribution had become part of that conversation and that debate. But I found it extremely disheartening that any bit of meaning in what I’d intended to say had got overgrown with so many weeds of misunderstanding, deliberate distortion. Or if not misunderstanding, in some cases then construing the words of what I said in quite a legitimate way, but not in the way I intended.

*Many people would regard you as a radical. For example, in writing *The Politics of Experience* you were one of the first people who took experience seriously as a central motif. Yet you don’t cut it off from our interactions with our fellow human beings. Related to that of course is your work in psychiatry and anti-psychiatry. I know that’s not something you particularly want to be associated with.*

I don’t see how anyone could see me as a radical in a political activist sense. And I certainly would not say that I don’t like to be
thought of as radical. It’s a nice word to bask under the warmth of, like “profound” and so forth.

In talking about the place that one gives experience to, it is really a matter of taking our human life cycle from conception to death. There are certain critical moments in that life cycle physiologically and as adults we experience . . . It is very difficult to say what one means by “experience”! There is an attitude of mind that simply seems to say that what we as human beings experience doesn’t matter at all. It’s got no metaphysical significance to speak of. It’s mainly a nuisance as far as scientific truth is concerned. Practically no experience can be believed naively.

When it is believed it’s almost as though what one said is that experience is a psychosis of matter—that experience is itself another countable aberration in the universe that knows nothing of it, and gets on its own way apparently without it. And yet it is only through it that we know anything at all. So there’s a complex problem of different orders of this scientific methodology. The way one looks and what one sees and what comes into view. And what is revealed or concealed according to how one looks at anything at all.

I don’t know the base word for a “looking at” that has been described by Foucault as this look of observation, inspection, monitoring and surveillance—we “look at.” This is the look with which we look at people under certain circumstances. My dentist gives me nitrous oxide and a local anaesthetic and as far as he is concerned he is not out of touch with me as a human being, but he is giving all his attention to an objective problem which I am paying him to, I hope, ablate, subtract, eliminate, strip of his look any subjectivity that he has that is not going to contribute to his skill at drilling into my root. I am not asking for personal feelings or for him to be aware of the phenomenology of dentistry. I am not asking for that at all. And that’s fine.

But then it applies to the way I die, it’s applied to the way my children are taught to speak and move. It’s applied all over the place. And I dislike that impinging, transgressive spread and that encroachment on the on-goings that are being looked at and examined and dissected and controlled and started and stopped in that way. There’s no way you can look at anyone that way, it’s an
instrumental look, and I don’t want be at the receiving end of that unless I am able to keep that look as a slave that doesn’t become my master, that I’m in control of that look. I can use that look, I can pay someone to look at me in that way and stop looking at me in that way when I want them to stop. He can’t take over my whole life with that look. He can’t take over something as profoundly important in every sort of way symbolically, socially and physically and the way I want to live my body or the way a woman wants to have a baby, I find that that’s an insufferable transgression. So that’s one side of things that unites in my mind as a common factor in the domain of psychiatry, the domain of medicine in general in the domain of midwifery and obstetrics and all this field of thanatology, I suppose thanatology is here to stay now—no wonder.

But that sensibility has been with you since the beginning—that the critique of standard institutional psychiatry has been exactly of that nature. It’s been an attack on a knowledge which is not guided by love, which is really interested only in control and manipulation.

I do not in the slightest claim to be a rare human being, in so far as I’m capable of feeling. I’m not saying that scientists and psychiatrists who exclude this mode of being with and feeling with from their scientific work are incapable of it in their personal lives. But this sort of psychiatrist has developed a stance to his professional work whereby he feels that he’s almost professionally culpable if he doesn’t look at people that way. The way doctors learn how to do that is to start off with dead dogfish and move on to a dead human being, a corpse. Then we kill a frog and put it through all sorts of numbers from smashing its head to cutting its head off and pithing its spine and seeing all the different parts twitch. Then you eventually cut it all up, into bits that are still twitching. And then you have a bit of muscle or a bit of nerve from this frog. And then you learn how nerves and muscles work and then you move to patients in hospital and you start studying diseases and you can get a ten pound frog muscle that twitches, you start testing reflexes in neurological conditions. And in the movement from muscle nerve twitch to the tendon reflex no person has entered the horizon—there’s no human being. There’s a neurological condition, you’re simply looking at this bit of some-
thing with a tendon doing things to a piece of stuff. In some mysterious way there is a person attached, in some way connected, if only legally.

But at any rate there’s a patient there. It’s neurology, you’re studying the nervous system and you’re not really concerned with the personality of someone who’s got pneumonia, except to give them a tranquillizer if they won’t lie quiet. There’s all sorts of objectives, studies that you can do. You can classify behavior even as an objective thing that people now suffer from Type A or Type B behavior, people with different sorts of heart conditions. You now suffer from your own conduct, your conduct has become reified, objectified. The agent has been abolished, and by reversal has become pacified, and people now suffer from pathological syndromes of behavior. So, instead of Manfred Bleuler or Ted Lidz in their descriptions of having a girl in their clinic or office who’s scared stiff of them, they are doing an interview with acute excitement and a mute catatonic schizophrenic whose nervous system needs to be toned down because there is too much sensual arousal.

From the moment of entering into the whole system they’ve never even seen a person there. When I started psychiatry, I thought it was a branch of neurology! I was interested in the brain, my first job was in a neurosurgical unit. I was into this: how do these disorders of the body affect the mind? I wanted to know how the brain affected the mind. So I looked at people in this way. I never thought there was any other way to do it though I hadn’t lost my fellow feeling like the rest of my fellow students. But when I came to a patient I de-listed the complaint. I did an examination trying to find out what was the matter. And what was the matter was some sort of delineable if possible, pathological condition or syndrome, or set of conditions. So I went through all this stuff with people in psychiatry and as you quickly discover, you’ve got to discover it yourself. You examine them all over back-side forward, upside down and so forth and there is nothing the matter with them physically and no pathological stuff.

When it came to people who are schizophrenic, I looked at people like that and there was nothing the matter with them. I couldn’t make this out. Apart from what the textbooks say textbooks go into primary, secondary or first rank symptoms of schizo-
phrenia what psychiatrists in actual clinical practice go through in diagnosing someone who is schizophrenic is that it is someone who is different. They never diagnose anyone who they felt was essentially the same as them as schizophrenic. It is a way of expressing, as I said, in *The Divided Self*, that disjunction. I think that for every sociologist, as well as psychiatrists, and anthropologists, that’s abundantly clear that it is a disjunction that generates the diagnosis. But the disjunction is of a peculiar order. I can’t understand this person who is inaccessible to me. As Jaspers says, it is on the other side of an abyss—his psychic life is different from mine. I repeatedly found that I felt I could understand this person perfectly well with no particular difficulty. I didn’t see how or why other people would draw that line where they did. I still don’t know why, actually.

It doesn’t mean to say there isn’t an abyss. If someone is on the other side of an abyss he doesn’t cease to be a human being because I can only wave at him across a vast abyss, because he speaks another language, has made up a language of his own, is in a different inner space, is on a trip, or freaked out, or lost or confused. Now, the psychiatrists say the reason why that communication has broken down to me and you is that there is something the matter with you which makes you unable to communicate with me, or with anyone for that matter. Or yourself properly. And so that is why I can’t understand you. It’s because you’re not capable of making yourself understood and you’re not understandable. *Verstehen* therefore is out of the question. It’s a complete error of reading of the situation to apply *Verstehen* modalities to a situation that is only explainable, it is not understandable.

Again, I am amazed that non-psychiatrists still have to be intimidated by psychiatry. All the hermeneutics of this problematic, how psychiatrists are allowed to get away with being vested with such power over such a crude issue! I mean, that would be all right if it was said in conversation as an insult to someone. “You are just making no real sense at all, and it’s not even good for you to be allowed to speak. Your mind is so confused. And the reason why it is so confused is that I can’t understand a word of what you’re saying and that’s that.” In decent human dialogue if I feel that about someone, I don’t feel impelled then to work them over
with therapeutic vigor, rigor and zeal. Well, that’s all right with me, I don’t expect to understand everyone. Possibly there are quite understandable reasons (if I knew what they were) why he doesn’t want to be understood. I don’t have to stretch my imagination too far to imagine someone in that position. What I cannot, however, do is move into a sympathetic or empathetic mode while remaining in a “looking at” mode it is a contradiction of terms. The interesting thing is, that lack of understanding, applied with that look, in fact, extends essentially to everyone, not really just schizophrenics. If you think that schizophrenia is a name that a psychiatrist gives to someone who can’t understand, then Bleuler was quite prepared to say that he couldn’t understand 90% of people who are tinged with schizoid or schizophrenic symptoms. It is quite often said that if psychiatrists could diagnose people at will, 1 in 10 of any group of people would be definitely down the hatch. I mean, how can this be taken seriously?

[Thomas] Szasz says that you really champion the schizophrenic, that you think that it’s wonderful to go through voyages of discovery, of inner space, and they are really better people in a sense than the usual.

Since The Politics of Experience I haven’t given a long exposition in a book of my own position, but I have done many interviews in which I have said again, I think that some people, who for a variety of reasons get in dislocated and social space, getting out of position, being insufferable, not breaking the law in any gross way but act in such a way that no one can stand them any longer. This is a point that Hugh Crawford has particularly made and he is absolutely right. No one was ever sent away to hospital for schizophrenia if the company that they were keeping wanted them just in any ordinary way to be around. Either frightening, or worrying or alarming or putting people off... So there is no question that there are people who get into positions of being diagnosed as schizophrenic or go into unusual states of mind or so forth. People get diagnosed as schizophrenic or whatever state of mind, in terms of their likeability in general, or in terms of the vices and virtues, in terms of the Robert Burns sort of thing, “A man’s a man for all that,” whether you’re daft of not, I don’t think they’re any better or worse than you or me. I said this is degrad-
ing, as it is. Sociologically, it stigmatizes, it places someone down and it strips a person of their total legal rights to their own body, to their own time, to their own money, to their own words, to their own utterances, to their own thoughts, etc. etc. So I agreed with [Erving] Goffman and other people, yes this is a degradation, this is degrading. It invalidates the person quite explicitly and turns them into (in an obvious, justifiable pun), at the same time an invalid and an invalidated person.

So I said I’m doing that. So the screams went up from some quarters that I was idealizing schizophrenics, as Nathan Ackerman, the American family therapist, said, “You’re a schizophrenia lover, Ronnie, that’s why they can’t stand you!” So I’m just going to say that I’m going to treat this person on equal terms with me. If he behaves in a way that is insufferable to me, I’ll deal with that accordingly. I might even deal with it by the use, or the power to use the diagnosis of schizophrenia. Though I’ve never had occasion to move in that type of setting, I am glad to say, for years now.

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