

independent of empirical observation or scientific, logically valid, methods. No supernatural sanction for anything could be admitted when the very concept of it, whether analysed in Cartesian or empirical terms, seemed devoid of clear meaning. Catholics had disputed with Protestants and with heretics in their own midst – and for that matter with Jews and Muslims and pagans too – the validity of their source of knowledge of the ways of God, and of men’s duties towards him and towards each other ‘in him’ and ‘under him’; and these disputes, which had involved the whole of the civilised world in almost continuous bloodshed and misery, turned out to be a dispute about nothing at all – nothing but the product of ignorance, fear and weakness and the unscrupulous exploitation of these by cunning and ambitious knaves, clad in royal or priestly garments.

Grotius had spoken in terms of the ancient Roman and medieval concept of the law of nature, *jus naturale*: a set of rules of conduct so powerful and authoritative that even God himself could not alter or abolish them. Montesquieu had laid it down that human laws should be ‘les rapports nécessaires qui dérivent de la nature des choses’,¹ ‘necessary relationships which derive from the nature of things’. This ‘nature’, these ‘things’, are susceptible to empirical examination: they include such factors as climate and soil, local customs and psychological differences of national character, and other accessible data. But from these, laws must somehow be ‘derived’: if we understand the purpose for which men were created, we can so adjust the laws that they promote this purpose best in the given environment and applied to the given national or tribal characteristics; and because these environmental and social and psychological factors vary in the world, the laws will vary correspondingly.

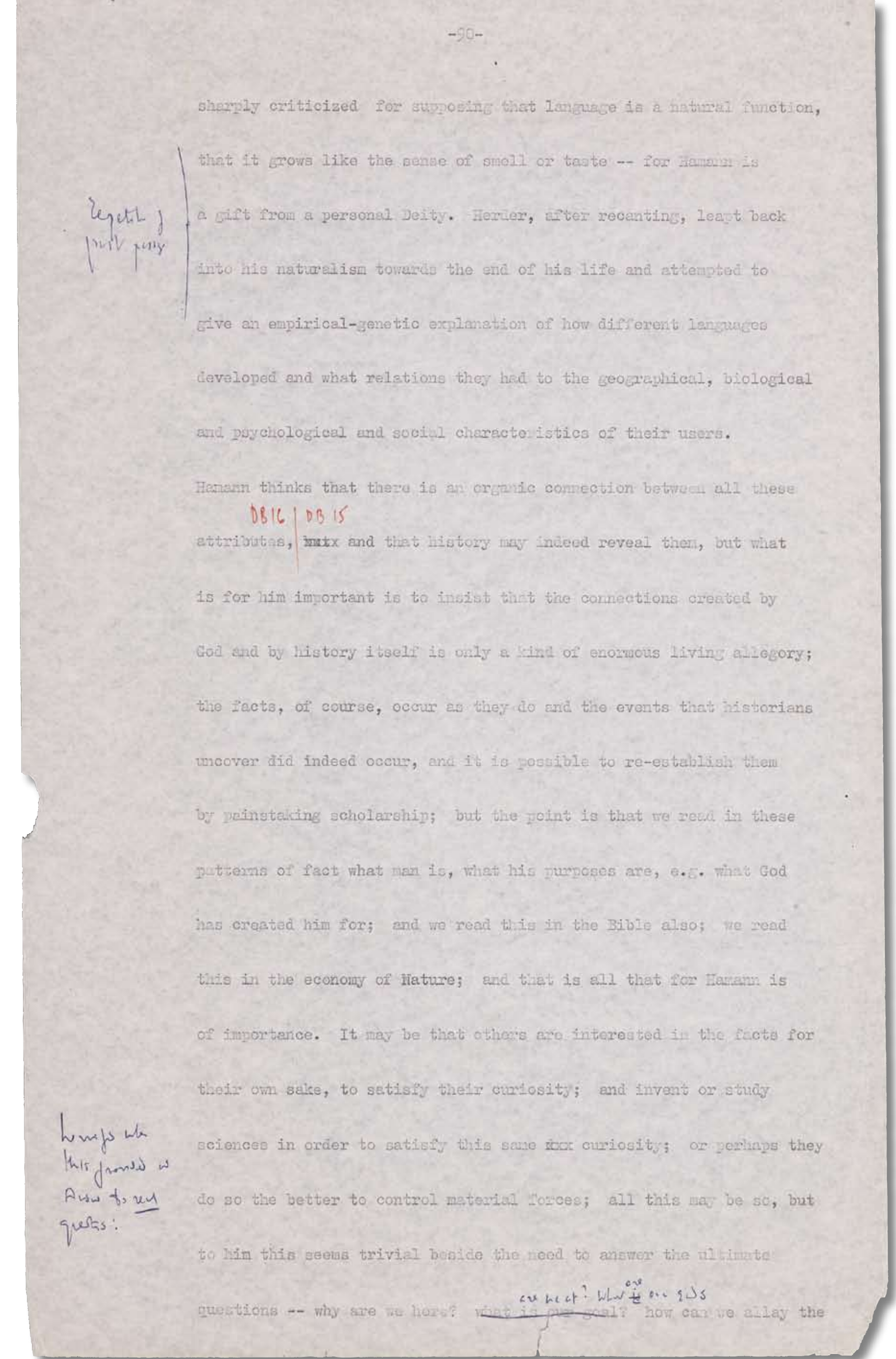
But what is this purpose? How do we discover it? Is it, too, an empirical datum? And if so, where must we look for it? Descartes, Grotius, to some degree Montesquieu too, seem to believe in some ‘rational’ faculty which reveals it: it reveals the absolute end or goal of man as such, whence the *ius naturale* – an equally absolute set of rules – logically flows. This seems identical with the traditional philosophical doctrine that there are within man certain innate principles – that if only he will look within his heart he will find within it precepts of absolute validity which his maker has inscribed therein

¹ *De l'esprit des lois*, book 1, chapter 1.

for his guidance: that there is, in short, a faculty, unique, infallible, confined to rational beings alone and necessarily proof against any obstacles which empirical experience may throw up, which tells us how to live, what to do, what best satisfies the goal which we have not invented but discovered within ourselves, set for us by some agency in some sense outside ourselves: God or nature. This is the ‘nature des choses’, and the ‘rapports nécessaires’ are deducible from the way in which we fit into the system of ends or goals imposed upon us by the demiurge. We have, in effect, returned to the image of the orchestra, the play: the doctrines whether of Grotius or of Montesquieu, for all their non-teleological appearance, are unintelligible save in a world conceived as a purposive process; and no doubt in the hundred years which lie between Descartes and Condorcet it was only men of very exceptional capacity for independent thought – a Hobbes, or a Spinoza – who could even so much as conceive of a world which did not, albeit ‘immanently’, impersonally, embody a purpose – let alone the near-meaninglessness of this notion for empiricists of any order: for impersonal ‘purposes’, immanent or otherwise, are not the kind of data which observation or experiment discover. And yet, as we shall see, even the boldest materialists of the eighteenth century, who thought themselves completely emancipated from all the metaphysical and theological ‘rubbish’ of their fathers, had by no means freed themselves from their obsessively teleological categories, which mingle very queerly with their fierce empiricism.

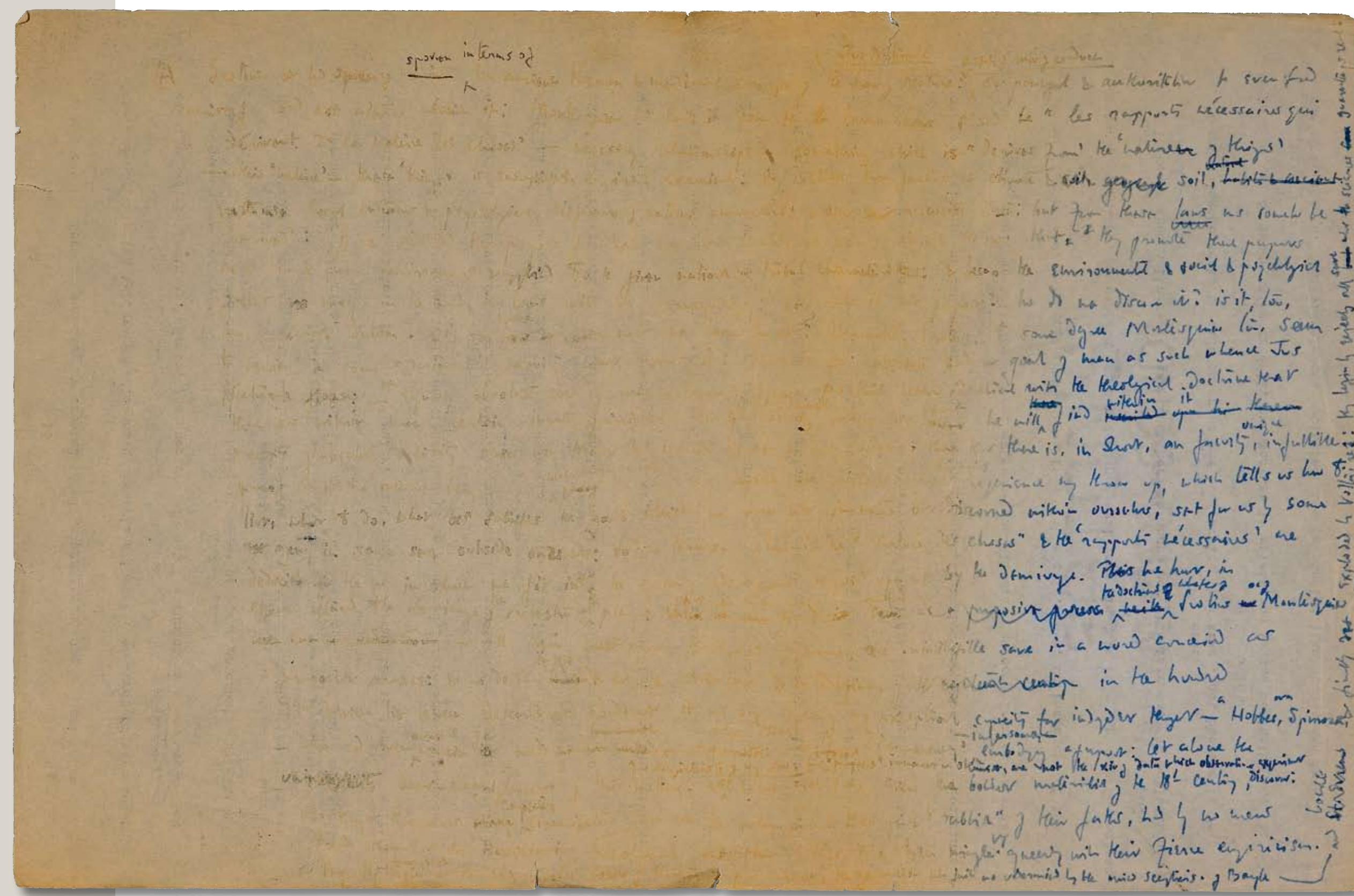
But they begin bravely enough – the new, *révolté* followers of Newton and pure science, the generation whose faith was undermined by the mild scepticism of Bayle and Locke, and finally exploded by Voltaire. They begin by rejecting all save what the sciences guarantee as real: nothing that a man cannot observe, or infer from what he observes, or imagine in terms of what he observes, can be knowledge. Observation is the only criterion which can preserve us from the wild fantasies, the absurd doctrines, which have bedevilled our ancestors, for nothing should be believed without evidence, and all evidence comes from experience. Let us then observe the world in which we live with the cold, keen, unbiased eye of the natural scientist, who expects neither good nor evil from his data, and looks at them neither with hope nor fear, but solely as data, as collections within which he seeks to find an order; seeking to describe this order, not because it is good or bad, interesting or dull, but because it exists, and is the beginning and

Berlin’s papers included many works in an advanced stage of composition that had never been published. One of the most interesting of these was a study of the obscure Prussian pietist thinker Johann Georg Hamann, a radical opponent of the Enlightenment and, for Berlin, one of the fathers of Romanticism. Berlin had lectured on Hamann at Columbia University and in Washington in 1965, and had dictated a text, evidently with publication in mind. However, the text was incomplete. The last of the main chapters stopped in mid-sentence with the words: ‘How can we allay the ...?’



The last page of the main text of Berlin’s study of Hamann. Were any more pages ever typed? If so, what became of them? The red codes show where the Dictabelts stop and start.

Intellectual archaeology



Another unpublished text was the longest continuous work Berlin ever wrote, *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age*, originally drafted in 1951 in preparation for a course of lectures at Bryn Mawr. It consists of a dictated typescript, heavily revised in manuscript. Sometimes the revisions spilled over on to the backs of the sheets, or even on to extra sheets. When the text was found, it was folded over so that a handwritten sheet was on the outside. Evidently this bundle had been left out in the sun at some point, since the writing on the exposed half of the sheet was so bleached out as to be largely illegible. A gap would have had to be left in the published version had it not been possible to photograph the bleached text through an ultra-violet filter, revealing enough of the original to allow decipherment.

The solution to this cryptographic puzzle appears on pp. 40–1 of *Political Ideas in the Romantic Age* (2006) (left).

Without the rest of the text this work was unpublishable, frustratingly. One day, however, a search of Berlin’s cellar produced a brown envelope labelled ‘Hamann’, containing a number of ‘Dictabelts’ – red plastic recording devices used in Dictaphone machines in the 1950s and 1960s. The plastic belts had become too brittle to be played, but when slightly warmed in an oven and played on a refurbished Dictaphone machine from the National Science Museum they finally yielded up their secret.



Dictabelts came in paper packets of 10 called Dictapak. On the back of this one Berlin has written ‘Haman[n] 2’, i.e. presumably the second Dictapak of Hamann Dictabelts

Each Dictabelt was numbered in chalk after dictation so that the sequence could be followed by the typist. This is No 2. It was No 15 that showed how ‘How can we allay the ...?’ continued. Further belts completed the missing part of the work, now published as ‘The Magus of the North’ in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* (2000).