Chapter 4

**Quod omnes tangit ab omnibus approbari debet:**
The Words and the Meaning

Human beings are governed by two things, namely, by natural law and moral conventions.

Gratian¹

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The sovereign, bearing only one single and identical aspect, is in the position of a private person making a contract with himself, which shows that there neither is, nor can be, any kind of fundamental law binding on the people as a body, not even the social contract itself.

Rousseau²

1 Introduction

At the level of greatest simplicity, intellectual historians can be divided into two groups: those who deal with words and those who deal with thoughts. Because thoughts are the more interesting of the two, much attention is focused on understanding the origin, evolution, and influence of, in an ascending order of complexity, ideas, theories, the thought of single individuals, and the thought of communities that are united by their adherence to the rules of certain disciplines, such as jurisprudence, philosophy, and theology. The study of ‘objective spirit,’ i.e., the thought of communities not united by any discipline, was once most prominently advocated by Hegel, and then seems to have fallen somewhat out of favor. More recently, French intellectual historians

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have succeeded in reviving it under the name *mentalité*, and in extending its scope to include people at the lower end of the social scale, to whom previous historians would only reluctantly have attributed the possession of mind at all—or so it is believed.

The historian of thoughts, however, faces a predicament: on the one hand, thoughts can only be identified by the words with which they are expressed but, on the other hand, it is by no means necessary to use the same words to express the same thoughts. Especially if thoughts are complicated, or expressed in more than one language, the words used to express an identical thought may be very different indeed. This makes it difficult to be sure that the thought under investigation is a single object, and not many different ones. Is it, for example, really possible to say that such different thinkers as Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas were discussing the same idea when they spoke about justice? Is there such a thing at all as ‘the same idea’? Is there a ‘theory of the state,’ which unites the writers discussed in the textbooks of the history of political thought? How does one ascertain that there is something specific to which the terms ‘objective spirit’ and *mentalité* can meaningfully refer, not to mention the difficulty in finding out the moment at which one *mentalité* may change into another? The point here is not to deny the possibility of asking the questions confronts the historian of thoughts with extraordinary methodological difficulties.

This gives the historian of words a distinct advantage. Precisely because he can always refer his questions to a material object, something consisting of audible or visible signs, rather than of invisible thoughts, it is less difficult for him to be sure of the identity of his object. The history of words is almost as easy to write as it is to read and date the documents in which the words are found. Historians of words are able to achieve results which would make others blush. Unlike the history of an idea, which is often difficult to trace even within a single language, the history of words may sometimes be pursued across the boundaries of several languages and over many centuries. The word ‘paradise,’ to give a simple example, can be traced from modern Western European languages to Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabian and Avestan. In some cases, such as the language, or languages, from which the various Indo-European dialects arose, it even seems possible to infer the existence of words in the past of which, excepting the words which descended from them, no trace exists in the present. Undoubtedly these matters are subject to questions of their own. But which historian of thoughts would not love to be able to

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3 *Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*, 649, s.v. ‘paradise.’

4 Indoeuropean ‘*gwōus,*’ for example, has been inferred from descendants such as the English ‘cow,’ German ‘Kuh,’ Armenian ‘*kov,*’ Sanskrit ‘*gaus,*’ and other forms of the same word; ibid., 223, s.v. ‘cow.’