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The Mind in Giambattista Vico's *New Science*

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Abstract

This thesis is a reading and interpretation of Giambattista Vico's model of the human mind in the *New Science*. It focuses on the mind because understanding Vico's account of its origin and development is the key to assessing his overall claim of having discovered a new science of humanity. I contend that when the following three broad questions have been addressed the *New Science* will reveal a deeper and more complete dimension. The first is how Vico arrives at his thesis that the mind's development is a product of natural, social, and linguistic elements, rather than the emergence of innate faculties. Is this formulation coherent, and are there elements whose functions are not explained? The second is how he believed that a science of humanity was possible. Vico thought that true knowledge, or science, consisted in a synthesis of the esoteric and the practical. Was it realistic for him to suppose that these very different paradigms could coalesce and provide a backbone for scientific research? The third question is whether the accounts he gives of sacred and profane history are consistent and do not compromise his main thesis that history is human directed. Was Vico's explanation of the identity of the mind compatible with both narratives? It is intended that the development of the answers to these three questions will yield a new interpretation of the way Vico's account of the mind is understood.

The originality of this thesis lies in two main points. The first is that it proceeds with a description, *in toto*, of the phenomenon of mind that follows the unfolding of the phases of the *ideal eternal history*. Previous studies have treated the characteristics of

mind in separate phases, but none to my knowledge takes the present approach of viewing the mind in its entirety as it persists throughout universal history. The second is that it explains that Vico's position throughout the *New Science* was that the persistence of mind is due to somatically-based activity. I point out that Vico was establishing a new paradigm for the mind in which meaning is created through connectedness to social and physical activity. This position is in stark contrast to computationist and rationalist theories of mind in which, theoretically, rational consciousness could exist apart from a physical platform.

I have made use of many references to historical and contemporary sources about the mind and cognition in general. The purpose of these are, firstly, to provide an orientation to where Vico's ideas belong in the history of philosophy and, secondly, to indicate where those ideas may be situated or find resonance in contemporary theories of mind.

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Introduction

Purpose of the thesis

This work is a study of the human mind in Vico's *New Science*.¹ It is a detailed reading of that aspect of the work, rather than a full treatment of the work as a whole. The methodology used to study what Vico intended by 'the mind' in the *New Science* will be based on an analysis of the text and a positioning of it within the history of philosophy. Links between Vico's theory and modern scholarship on the mind will be pointed out where I think it will be helpful to clarify certain arcane passages and concepts. The main purpose of this thesis is to ask what Vico means by the mind and whether he has a coherent account of what that is and how it developed. I am also interested, secondarily, in examining how science or understanding can be advanced by studying Vico's theory of mind.

Certain contemporary theories of the mind which share issues that are congenial to Vico's thinking are referred to in this study. They can provide fresh perspectives on some of Vico's conjectures and intuitions, and Vico's insights into the mind might also

¹ In this study this means the *Second New Science*. References to Vico's *New Science* are to Fausto Nicolini's paragraph enumeration common to the Italian and English editions. The titles *Scienza nuova* or *New Science* denote the *Scienza nuova seconda*, the title Vico used for the second edition of 1730 and used since Nicolini to refer to this and the final edition of 1744. The *New Science* (after *NS*) appeared altogether in three editions – 1725, 1730, and an expanded version in 1744. All references in this study refer to the final edition cited here: Giambattista Vico, *The New Science*, translated by Thomas Bergin & Max Fisch (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984).

possibly have relevance for them. But this is primarily a work of the history of philosophy, not a work of cognitive science, and my main concern is with contributing to the discussion of Vico's theory of mind, and it is on that basis I will proceed.² The foundational importance that Vico places on study of the mind as the key to understanding universal history is succinctly stated here:

Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall. Indeed, we make bold to affirm that he who meditates this Science narrates to himself this ideal eternal history so far as he himself makes it for himself by that proof "it had, has, and will have to be" (*dovette, deve, dovrà*). *For the first indubitable principle posited above is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise (guisa) must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind (my italics).*³

The modern method of inquiry into nature by mathematical modelling was in ascendancy during Vico's lifetime. For Vico, this method was flawed in its premise that man was capable of having perfect knowledge (*scienza*) of that which he had not made. Nothing was more obvious to him than that full knowledge of something can only take place when one is physically and mentally involved in its making. Vico believed that nature was a domain which humans could only have partial knowledge (*certezza*) of be-

² What comes to mind is a statement by Croce in the Conclusion to *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* [1913], translated by R.G. Collingwood, (Transaction Publishers: New Brunswick, NJ, 2002): "It is nevertheless a fact that no one has written on Vico without feeling a need of casting his eyes over later years and noting the resemblances and analogies between the Neapolitan philosopher's doctrines and those of fifty or a hundred years after". 237.

³ NS 349.

cause they were not its creators. This is one of the chief discoveries of the *New Science*, the 'verum-factum' principle.⁴

There are many ways to approach the *New Science*, and detailed attention has been paid to his ideas on history, rhetoric, epistemology and metaphysics, to cite only a few areas of rich Vichian scholarship. But the subject of mind has been treated in a fragmentary way, perhaps because it is the prism through which the meaning of all other elements of the *New Science* must pass and its own meaning has been taken for granted in the process. This is surprising because Vico himself says that the key to human history (the world of nations) is to be found in understanding how the mind developed in time. One of the reasons why this is so is because if Vico is taken verbatim in his professed orthodox Catholicism many of the key terms of his philosophy, like mind and providence, do not make sense within that tradition. The fact is he never speaks of a permanent human identity in his own philosophy. The closest thing that Vico suggests to an essential human identity with persistence in time, even though it undergoes important transformations, is the mind. Nor is providence, the *explanans* of the 'ideal eternal history', his name for the pattern that all nations and peoples traverse in the course of their existence, for Vico the traditional Christian divine order that culminates in human and universal redemption, rather it is an abstract universal governing principle in which religion is less the conduit of revealed truth than a foundational social structure that makes possible legal and civic institutions. It is hard to see what psychological comfort, Vico's concept of religion offers, although he makes it very clear that he thinks it has great value as a socialising mechanism. But one will not find in it a normative ethics, nor even

⁴ *Verum esse ipsum factum* ("the true is itself the made"). Another version of the same principle is *verum et factum convertuntur* ("the true and the made are convertible"). Vico's idea first appears in the *De Antiquissima*, although it is first applied to developing the human sciences in the *New Science*.

the certitude of mechanistic explanation, and nowhere any reference to salvation. All of this is curious in light of his professed Catholicism. How can this be explained? The absence of traditional religious reference can possibly be interpreted as an attempt by Vico to let the *New Science* stand alone as science without the buttress of doctrine.

These considerations have led me to pose three questions. The first is to ask what is the substance or content of mind in Vico: does he think there is an essential nature to mind or is it entirely a product of historical contingency? The second is to ask what role mind plays in the *ideal eternal history*: to what extent is history a product of mind, and how much of it is caused by Vico's providence? Thirdly and finally, I ask what the logical status is of the mind's judgements with respect to the objectivity and relativity of truth: is it considered a reliable and accurate instrument, or are its measurements approximative and subjective? These questions are interdependent, and it might be profitable at times to compare central notions of Vico's with other theories of the mind, but the primary task is to determine if Vico had developed a theory of mind that is coherent and does not contradict his other claims in the *New Science*. Here is the order and summary of the chapters:

Chapter 1: *Introduction*: Presented here: 1) the aim of the thesis; 2) Vico's science of the mind; 3) some problems of interpretation.

Chapter 2: *Literature review*: The main themes of Vichian scholarship that are reviewed here are grouped into three divisions: 1) the historical, 2) the rhetorical, and 3) the epistemological. The principal criterion for inclusion, other than certain classical works that no thesis can afford to ignore for their general content, has been the relevance of these studies for a reading of Vico's philosophy of mind.

Chapter 3: *The beast that became human*. Here, I describe Vico's first type of mind that is characterized as the 'barbarism of sensation', a sense-dominated awareness of brute reality that is lacking in self-awareness. I ask how Vico relates this to the concept of *conatus*, which he says contains the seeds of innate mindedness in man.

Chapter 4: *The giant that opened the mind of man*. In this chapter, I treat Vico's account of how language, thought, and emotions share the same origins and develop concurrently. At this stage, imaginative thinking, which he calls the 'poetic mind', begins to give representation to emotional states. I show here how the creative process in cognition is fundamentally related to utility.

Chapter 5: *The children of the human race*. At this time, patterns of behaviour and imagination are codified into a system of archetypes which Vico calls the 'imaginative universals'. This represents a major transition in cognitive development from instinctive awareness to the formation of conceptual thinking. I adopt the point of view that the 'imaginative universals' are part of a process of causal relationship whereby emotional states become imaginative concepts which in turn lead to the creation of social structures that then require new emotional states in order to flourish.

Chapter 6: *The architects of reason*. Vico introduces the explanatory concept of the 'intelligible universals' as the collection of abstract ideas that furnish the theoretical structure for the formation of institutions in civic societies. The nature of thought in this phase is more analogous and allegorical than the previous phase that was metaphorical and heterologous. I make the case here that rationality, as Vico conceived it, is an act of reflection based on the 'intelligible universals' which permit the physical detachment necessary for the adjudication of choices.

Chapter 7: *The world of nations*. I discuss here Vico's conception of fully developed humanity, *tutta spiegata*, which is a synthesis of rational and non-rational elements of man's being. I attempt to clarify his position as regards the limits of rationality and the function of language in shaping our understanding of reality. Vico's philosophic wisdom, which he calls "the true and proper nature of man", is a pragmatic response to affairs of utility in civil society, and not an esoteric exercise in reasoning. For this he is sometimes considered a relativist, nevertheless he firmly grounds the non-quantifiable in a universal standard of reason.

Chapter 8: *A deep solitude of spirit and will*. The final phase of Vico's life cycle of the mind is characterized by what he calls the 'barbarism of reflection', that is, a state in which language loses its imaginative power and meaning is reduced to material literalness. This development is pernicious to society, as it leads to solipsism and a loss of common will. My main interest here is to show how important Vico believed it was to maintain "imaginative fictions" for the health of a society, and to explore the epistemological implications of this position.

Chapter 9: *The meaning of return: Providence and the model of mind*. This chapter focuses on the importance of the concept of providence as it relates to the development of the human mind. The main difficulty with Vico's claim that providence directs the *ideal eternal history* is that it seems to contradict his account of history as a product of the human mind, which has developed without the aid of direct divine intervention.

Chapter 10: *Conclusion*. In this chapter I state my reasons for believing that Vico's human mind is a product of continuous development that represents the synthesis of natural, social and linguistic elements. Although the phases that it undergoes in its trans-

formation are decidedly different from one another, their ontological homogeneity is guaranteed by their connection to their common physicality and antecedent states. This is not to say that Vico was making the case for an essential human nature; rather, I conclude that he is saying the human mind is a product of historical processes, and not divine or innate factors. But in spite of the natural and social explanations Vico gives, the metaphysical principle of the *ideal eternal history* assures the continuity of the states of mind. I discuss how Vico meant by this concept a universal structure that is the result of human activity.

Vico's science of the mind

The *New Science* is the study of man in nature, more properly human institutions in the world of nature. Its method of research is to integrate philology and philosophy, with the aim of giving a rational interpretation of that record without subjective prejudice. It claims to have universal truth, although the focus of its inquiry, the ontology of human institutions, is contingent in a way that natural phenomena are not:

Vico finally came to perceive that there was not yet in the world of letters a system so devised as to bring the best philosophy, that of Plato made subordinate to the Christian faith, into harmony with a philology exhibiting scientific necessity in both its branches, that is in the two histories, that of languages and that of things; to give certainty to the history of languages by reference to the history of things; and to bring into accord the maxims of the academic sages and the practices of the political sages.⁵

The germ of Vico's epistemology based on philological principles can be summed up in this way - whatever man has done in the past, and what he is doing in the present,

⁵ Giambattista Vico, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico* [1728], translated by Max Harold Fisch & Thomas Goddard Bergin (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1975). Throughout the *Autobiography* Vico refers to himself in the third-person. 155.

will be the basis of what he will do and know about himself in the future. His premise is that there are universal cultural institutions and modes of thought, and this belief in their non-relativity is what gives him the assurance that his investigations of mind and society can be pursued free from ideological prejudices and dogmatisms. His methodology was inspired by a desire to found knowledge on the evidence of things themselves, and he accorded truth value to the theoretical musings of the ancients in so far as they contributed to our reconstruction of the historical phases of mankind.

Vico was not the first thinker to see the stages of world history as a three-part structure, but his model was unique because, for him, history is a product of the human mind, and not a divinely ordained sequence of events or a determined course of material necessity.⁶ As such, for Vico, our knowledge of human affairs can be complete in a way that our knowledge of the natural world cannot be, because man is the cause and maker of history. This model is not without its complications however, for while it seems to proclaim human freedom from historical and material necessity on one hand, on the other there is interwoven in the human-made scenario the web of divine providence, whose presence in the affairs of men is never adequately explained by Vico. To question the depth or nature of Vico's religious references should be a primary consideration of any study of the *New Science* because they do affect the interpretation of many of his

⁶ See John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): "A different [from the philosophers (*NS* 23, 27-31) and the philologists (*NS* 3-4, 32-9) heretofore] starting point was needed, one provided by sacred history. Vico identified it, not in the Fall, but in the aftermath of the great Flood. After the Flood the posterity of Noah had been reduced to the level of beasts, wandering over the waterlogged, forest-covered earth. In that savage state men abandoned their women and mothers their children; the language of Adam was forgotten; the need to satisfy hunger, thirst, and lust suppressed any sense of humanity. Yet just then, 'in that long, dense night of darkness', a single light shone out, which provided the first truth of Vico's science: that the world of the Gentile nations was certainly made by men. The principles of his science were to be found, therefore, in the nature of the human mind itself. What was needed was a metaphysics which would study that mind, not in the individual, to lead him back to God (the province of divine philosophy), but in that common sense which is the mind of nations, in order to connect it with God as eternal providence". 230.

claims, for example, his account of the universal archetypes and their human or divine source. There are also sections of the *New Science* regarding political legitimacy whose meaning will change depending on whether Vico's statements on the divine are understood *sola Scriptura*.⁷ There seems to be a prima facie paradox in Vico between God the Creator and Architect and Man the Maker of Universal History. Penelope Corfield neatly summarises the movement of history in the *New Science*:

He borrowed the traditional imagery of historical 'ages' but yoked them into a dynamic model. Each great era of history, he believed, represented a significant organizing principle, which expresses a stage in human development. Initially, there was an ancient Age of the Gods. Life was simple, if sometimes violent, and people were ruled by kings. Then followed the Age of Heroes, when a feudal aristocracy prevailed by might, while, lastly, there prevails the Age of Men, in which people develop reason and laws but also risk becoming slothful and over-civilised. This model was underpinned, for Vico, by divine providence but was detached from a Christian commentary. It was intended as a global scenario, applicable to all societies. Furthermore, Vico warned that the Age of Men will not automatically last for ever, if people lose too much of their primitive simplicity. In that case, the sequence will revert to its origins and recommence, making a cyclical or slowly spiralling history.⁸

These various stages of history (the Ages of Gods, Heroes, and Men) had their corresponding types of mind. The first is poetic and imaginative, the second is probable and speculative, and the third is rational and reductive:

His fundamental idea was that the explanation of the history of societies is to be found in the human mind. The world at first is felt rather than thought; this is the condition of savages in the state of nature, who have no political organization. The second mental state is imaginative knowledge, "poetical wisdom"; to this corresponds the higher barbarism of the heroic age. Finally,

⁷ See Jurgen Trabandt, 'Thunder, Girls and Sheep, and Other Origins of Language', March 1995, *Discussion Papers* No. 15, Collegium Budapest/Institute for Advanced Study, for an extended discussion of these theological and political implications.

⁸ Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007) 169.

comes conceptual knowledge, and with it the age of civilization. These are the three stages through which every society passes, and each of these types determines law, institutions, languages, literature, and the characters of men.⁹

Vico is usually very thorough in describing how these modes of thinking correspond to specific historical phases, for there he explains their necessity in terms of utility and it is hard to find much that is objectionable (apart from certain examples of mismatched recondite knowledge) about that premise because it does not require a metaphysical explanation.¹⁰ But that transparency begins to cloud when he attributes teleology to mind that is separate from strictly pragmatic purposes and it assumes the character of a sort of final cause that directs humanity throughout history:

It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science, since we despaired of finding it from the philosophers and philologists, but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends, made means to serve wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth.¹¹

⁹ J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* [1920] (New York: Dover Books, 1987) 268.

¹⁰ Nevertheless, there are places where Vico is vague and imprecise in his historical chronology, and the heroic age has perhaps the most difficult boundaries to define. See Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990): "It is difficult to put exact limits up on the notion of the heroic age, a difficulty which arises from the fact that Vico himself seemed to change his mind over the boundary which distinguished it from the poetic age. Its central features are, however, clear enough. It arises in a period when, according to Vico, after the poetic and theological form of life has arisen, and its benefits have become apparent, strangers from outside appeal for asylum to the communities, or 'families', which have grown up around the theological world view, and are taken in on the basis of something akin to a very low feudal arrangement". 145

¹¹ NS 1108.

Two problems of interpretation

Although it is not uncommon for the reader coming to the *New Science* for the first time to feel a certain delight at the extraordinary trove of topics under his eye, the spontaneity of that reaction is not infrequently followed by a sense of puzzlement as to where it will all ultimately lead. Notwithstanding his attempt to make his work explicit by adopting an articulate form of elements and principles in a sort of axiomatic method, the content remains often bewildering. The difficulty one has of determining the meaning of obscure historical references, which are obviously important to Vico, is compounded by his periodic entanglements of theoretical guesswork based on vague historical claims. A frustrated reader may be forgiven for thinking that Vico might never have read the work that he wrote, or for thinking that he simply assumed the average reader could fill in the leaps and gaps between practical observation and metaphysical conjecture. An example of this is how when Vico sets his philosophical plough to work the earth of Scriptural exegesis his findings are often quite unlike anything one would expect from a Catholic philosopher: the *New Science* is not a work of religious persuasion, nevertheless the concept of providence carries it from beginning to end. Either we must accept the term at its face value, as a Christian concept of divine order and fulfillment, and then are not able to make any sense of his main thesis that humans make their own history, or we follow our intuition that not all the confusion between terms throughout the *New Science* are simply due to carelessness, but that some of them are systematic and deliberate attempts to avoid the censor and philosophical attack. And when Vico uses different words for the same concept then confusions do arise and his meaning becomes inaccessible. An example of this occurs when he distinguishes the *giganti* (giants) from the *bestioni* (beasts), which represent a transformation of the pri-

marily animal into a primitive human. But in the use of these terms, unfortunately, Vico is sometimes inconsistent. In some places he does not distinguish between the beasts and the giants when meaning the original gentiles as opposed to the Hebrews, and elsewhere he means by giants a later stage in the development of the general race of beasts. And in this study, the most important term is, naturally, mind, and it also belongs to that category of terms that require careful analysis.

The essence of mind and human nature

Isaiah Berlin succinctly expressed the critical difficulty in coming to grips with the term 'mind' in Vico:

Mente (mind) is not a clear concept in the *New Science*: it is most often the mind of individuals, but sometimes seems to be a collective entity, not unlike the similarly ambiguous *Geist* in German Idealist thought. This, as might be expected, has generated conflicting interpretations of Vico's metaphysical views – Hegelian, Catholic, Marxist, existentialist, empiricist, and combinations of these; nor is the end in sight.¹²

For Vico, all of our concepts come from sensible things: there are no *a priori* ideas which are scaffolding for our abstract concepts. Thought, for him, has a somatic origin, and when the connection with the body is severed through over-intellectualisation, in what Vico calls the *barbarism of reflection*,¹³ the species regresses to a new form of brutishness. Vico's ideas about the importance of society to cognition have in common with the social constructivists a rejection of a computationalist model that sees man as a rational cognitive power that can be stripped of its emotional and environmental connections. He, on the other hand, explains mind in the context of natural and social history; it

¹² Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000) 87.

¹³NS 1106.

cannot be understood apart from the environmental and social factors which shape it. The steps or process of the mind's acquisition of rationality, starting from a kinesic organ which is primarily emotional and non-rational, provides the fundamental focus of this research.

Is mind an essential "thing" for Vico or a collection of contingent properties that are characteristic of the kind of creature that possesses it? If it is a thing that has an ontology all its own, the question of how Vico explains its persistence through time becomes central to his thesis of how the *ideal eternal history* interacts with mankind in time; if it is the latter, how do we come to identify it by certain characteristics and not others? Rationality has long been associated as one of the most important, and sometimes *the* defining, trait of humanness in Western thinking, but in Vico's *corso* the beginning and end of history is marked by a type of mind that would not qualify, in the usual sense, as rational.¹⁴ Is there a conclusion to be drawn from this that in the periods of absence and atrophy of human thought humanity, properly speaking, does not exist? If this is the case, it might be that Vico was, uncommonly for his age, although not entirely alone, suggesting more an evolutionary model of human development than he was expounding a definition of human nature that is based on rational characteristics.¹⁵ How does Vico define mankind's shared *global identity* when the identifiable aspects of it range from beastliness to hyper-refined sensitivity? In other words, if man is a 'unit' what is it about that unit that does not change over time?

¹⁴ Although his reference was to individuals and not *Homo sapiens*, Montaigne's comment that "The end and the beginning of knowledge are equal in stupidity" contains a certain aptness to Vico's model of human development, for both imagine the life cycle of the individual to be reflected in that of the species. Montaigne, 'Apology for Raymond Sebond'.

¹⁵ Pico della Mirandola in *On the Dignity of Man* and *On Being and the One* points out that man has no "human nature". This thesis will show that Vico shares this conclusion.

Vico wanted to put his philosophy on the secure path of science, and to do that it would not serve his purpose to ignore the contribution of nature to mind. The challenge he set before himself was to correlate the apparently intrinsic differences between the three types of minds he describes - sensory-driven, imagination-centred, and rational - with the *corsi* of history in the world of nature. Contained in his premise that throughout the phases there is continuity is the assumption that the essential nature of change is associated with gradual transitions (*guise, modificazioni*) between states, and not radical transformations in which past characteristics are cancelled with every step forward. Vico does not seem to advocate in the *New Science* that there is an original immutable nature of mind that persists in time; rather, his position seems to be that there is continuity of them between the *corsi*.

The transitions of mind

How is this continuity achieved? The transitions between phases, the *corsi*, of mind are vital to understanding the mechanism of movement in Vico's *ideal eternal history*, for their nature determines its direction, and that is why I divide this study along the lines of the different phases as they occur in history. For this reason, I will concentrate on the nature of the *corsi*, what they are and how they came to be, as well as the mechanisms of social constructions, Vico's *cose* or institutions.

Vico claims that the *New Science* reveals the essential connection between the transcendent reality of an *ideal eternal history* that contains universal forms and the world of material particulars. The three natures of mind that he describes provide the efficient cause for this progression and their transitions affect the sequential pattern that history follows, and the problem of individuation for the three kinds of mind re-

quires particular consideration. But it is also a difficult question whether Vico meant they are metaphysically inevitable or evolutionary natural processes that do not have to follow a certain pattern. It is far from clear how the *global identity* of mind is maintained throughout all three of the *corsi*. Are the transitions identical, and are the agents of change between *corsi* the same or do they differ fundamentally from one another in the same way that a difference exists between a physical and a chemical change? And *what* is it that actually changes? Is it the form or the substance of the mind that undergoes change? Are they definable states in themselves, or 'marginal zones' in which aspects of both before and after states co-exist? This raises interesting metaphysical questions of identity and logical necessity, for if we cannot say with any degree of certainty when they begin and end, have we not made a distinction without adequate discernment?

The question of Vico's vagueness on this point seems to be unresolved. One way of reading the transitions is as a reconciliation of opposites, like in a Hegelian synthesis, in which the frequency of events become the 'standard' by which the new phase is identified. The sheer *quantity* of appearances - attributes and properties - becomes in some sense the *quality* of those phases, but it is not necessarily a question of simple arithmetic - greater than one half does not make a new whole - but rather depends, I would suggest, in large part on the perspective of the viewer. There is no *intrinsic* distinction between one state and the next: to borrow a metaphor, it is impossible to say where the stream ends and the river begins, but that is not to deny that both the stream and the river exist, only that where they meet does not exist in a specific location or time.

Just as the life of a person is marked by perceivable but nonetheless vague points of separation between stages, so too does the human mind in Vico's model pass from its infancy (poetic mind), to adolescence (heroic mind), to maturity (rational mind), and

finally to senescence (the hyper-reflective mind, Vico's *barbarism of reflection* (*barbarie della riflessione*)).¹⁶ This metaphor that casts the mind in a human life cycle can present problems, the chief one being that it might appear trivial, and it probably would be if he did not cast it within the framework of his universal history, in which all nations (which Vico points out is etymologically related to a "birth" or a "being born") and institutions are continuous with a cosmic vision.¹⁷ But that is also where an interpreter's real work must begin.

¹⁶ NS 915, 349, & 393.

¹⁷ The course of the *ideal eternal history* runs parallel with the mind's development, and that term, too, must be taken metaphorically. See Amos Funkerstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986): "More precisely, the "ideal history" does not describe the actual historical course of a definite social entity; rather it measures the actual history against the (methodological) norm of the regular sequence of the periods of social creativity. These periods and their immanent sequence are truly *ideal types*. They stand for the course of a "nation" if imagined in and by itself, isolated from other influences. The "ideal history" is a limiting case or a necessary fiction, much like Hobbes's state of nature". 282.

Literature review

The position that this thesis defends is that Vico's account of the mind is the key to understanding the *New Science*. Vico's framework for all human history, the *ideal eternal history*, is the movement of providential design in time, and it is through the modifications of the mind's development that this movement is realised. For this reason, the fundamental premise being followed here is that only by understanding what Vico meant by mind [*mente*], its nature and modality, can an adequate interpretation be made of the *New Science*. What is needed is a thorough enquiry that examines how the mind operates in relation to Vico's concepts of sacred and secular time.

The views of Vico scholars on those topics which chiefly influence the coherence of Vico's concept of mind are reviewed here; these are history, rhetoric, and epistemology. These topics are directly relevant to the mind for these reasons. In the case of history, Vico says that its unfolding is reflective of the mind's various stages of development: history and mind are conjoined. Rhetoric, for Vico, has its roots in the poetic imagination and is a powerful instrument for attaining philosophic truth: Vico believes that an understanding of rhetoric reveals the processes by which concepts are formed and judgments are made. Finally, Vico's epistemology is based on his principle of the

verum factum, an explanatory concept that ties physical activity to cognitive development.

The subject matter of the *New Science* reads as a catalogue of the outstanding intellectual concerns of its day: philosophy, rhetoric, philology, history and economic and political theory. Peter Burke wrote that the *New Science* is “a book stuffed so full of ideas that it almost bursts at the seams”.¹⁸ It is not surprising, then, that in a work that is so broad in its dimensions Vico scholars have tried many keys to decipher its meanings. Sometimes they have taken a single aspect of the work as the key to everything else; this has invariably led to over simplification in some cases and outright twisting of the meaning of the text in others.¹⁹ Overall, these efforts have contributed to understanding Vico, but even collectively their insights are only partial at best because they do not go deeply enough into the one thing that Vico himself took to be the most important aspect of the *New Science*, namely the human mind:

For the first indubitable principle posited above is that this world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise [*guisa*] must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind.²⁰

The relative scarcity of scholarship that probes the meaning of mind itself is a gap that this study hopes to fill. As was mentioned in the Introduction, the sequence of

¹⁸ Peter Burke, *Vico* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 32.

¹⁹ D.P. Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1981): “Many of Vico’s most brilliant interpreters hang like albatrosses around his neck, inhibiting open readings of his views. The practice to which a great number of his commentators have succumbed, and Vico’s ship has been sailed under many flags - absolute idealism, Catholicism, Marxism, historicism, particular conceptions of contemporary epistemology, and the methodologies of various contemporary schools of philosophy. Although Vico’s thought can be found through such approaches, it is soon lost in the security of their shores”. 23.

²⁰ NS 349. Also see NS 331.

phases that the mind undergoes is the key to the dynamic of the *ideal eternal history*, and an understanding of how the transitions occur explains in large measure how the nature of mind is affected by them. It is not enough to consider the mind as it is in each one of its separate phases; what is required is to treat it in its entirety throughout history, for only in this way can the logic of Vico's historical narrative reveal its coherence. These studies include key works by past and contemporary Vico scholars in which the subject of mind receives various degrees of attention. *The specific purpose of this review is to individuate in these studies the areas where greater attention to or a more accurate reading of the mind would have permitted a better understanding of the New Science.*

Giambattista Vico wrote the *New Science* in Naples in a period of transition between the end of Renaissance humanism and the ascendancy of scientific rationalism. At one end of the intellectual climate in which Vico lived were vestiges of the Middle Ages, with its paradigm of a divine cosmos, and on the other the modern age was beginning, where religion was increasingly considered unnecessary for the rational explanation of nature and man in the world.²¹ Vico's ideas are, by twists and turns, illuminating and murky. Perhaps this *chiaroscuro* quality of his thinking can be attributed in some way to the influence of the Neapolitan Baroque, which was and remains powerfully present all over that city, for it is a style that places some things in the dark in order to see more clearly what is in front of the eye. The logic of that aesthetic does seem relevant to reading the *New Science* (and there are several references to the Baroque in this thesis), for

²¹ Vico can be seen as a transitional figure between Renaissance Humanism and Historicism, skipping Rationalism and the Enlightenment. Indeed, Benedetto Croce wrote in *History as the Story of Liberty* [*La storia come pensiero e come azione*, 1938] (trans. Sylvia Sprigge) (New York: Meridian Books, 1955): "Vico's historical thought... belongs neither to the Protestant Reformation nor the traditions of the Catholic Church, but solely to the Renaissance". 135.

Vico's reasoning often depends as much on the stated as the unspoken, on the seen as the hidden, and on the factual as much as the imaginary.²²

I

Historical studies

Vico was unique among the thinkers of his age in that he thought the problems to human culture and civilisation could best be answered by viewing institutions as organic growths rather than as the creations of preeminent individuals or an established divine plan. This approach put him squarely at odds with both the social contract theorists and those who believed in a deity who was directly involved in forming humanity without man's own participation in the creative process. Against these animistic-like solutions, Vico envisioned man's social state to be the product of his language, mythology, religion, and political institutions, taken as a whole. Although Vico's concept of the role of providence renders the question of the boundaries between divine and human participation in the *ideal eternal history* controversial, this does not diminish the significance of Vico's original contribution to historical analysis, in which the mental development of mankind determines the appearance of social structures and the pace of conceptual thinking, a holistic position that would only be taken up much later in positivistic thinking.

²² Vico's own thinking shows, in many respects, the same high degree of reliance on the imagination as was common to the arts and sciences of the Baroque age. At that time, as is well known, the imagination was the central element in aesthetics, and in conjunction with visual and verbal rhetoric it was employed to persuade the intellect and direct the emotions to attain religious understanding. See Giulio Carlo Argan, *The Europe of the Capitals: 1600-1700* (Geneva: Albert Skira, 1964): "In order to conceive the universal, namely God, imagination suffices (not logic, philosophy or science); but it is necessary at the same time to prevent indifference or inertia from checking the flight of the imagination, and to see to it that all the operations of the mind and hand are guided by the imagination, or (what is the same thing) that technique is guided by art". 214.

In his landmark study, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*,²³ Benedetto Croce brought Vico back from the tomb of forgotten philosophers and re-established his reputation in Europe after being mostly ignored outside Italy since the French historian Jules Michelet encountered him in 1820 as an “intoxicating revelation”.²⁴ Croce’s 1913 study would retain its position as the most authoritative interpretation for a great many years, until the revival of Vico studies in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Croce was heavily indebted to Vico for much of his own thought, and it is not surprising that Croce’s explication of Vico is often closer to his own philosophical position than what can be found in Vico himself.²⁵ Nevertheless, in the same spirit that Croce issued his warning not to ignore the discoveries of the *New Science*, it would be a mistake to avoid the author who “singlehandedly... founded modern Vichian scholarship”,²⁶ and whose study “remains the most important and the most influential contribution to the subject”.²⁷

For Croce, Vico’s *verum factum* principle was a foundation stone of nineteenth-century German idealism’s concern with establishing the domains of the natural and human sciences. Croce cast Vico as a precursor to the idealists and practically ignored his theological ideas.²⁸ Although Croce acknowledged Vico’s religiosity it does not necessarily mean that he gave enough weight to the influence which that belief had in framing

²³ Benedetto Croce, *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* [1913] (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2002).

²⁴ Croce: “Michelet was the first or one of the first to proclaim, in his introduction, that Vico was not understood in the eighteenth century because he wrote for the nineteenth”. 274.

²⁵ Arnaldo Momigliano, ‘Reconsidering B. Croce (1866-1952)’, in *Essays in Ancient and Modern Historiography* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977) 253-276.

²⁶ Robert Caponegri, *Time and Idea: The Theory of History in Giambattista Vico* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1953) 4.

²⁷ Burke 6.

²⁸ In his own defence, in Appendix III of the *Philosophy*, ‘The Sources of Vico’s Theory of Knowledge’, Croce responded to his critics who accused him of an exclusively idealistic interpretation of some of Vico’s doctrines. See pp. 300-301.

Vico's concept of providence and its implications for Vico's cyclical theory of history. This is no minor point, for the interpretation of the role of providence is decisive for a reading of how mind came to be and the manifestations it assumed. For if Vico's position was that mind emerged from nature as a product of purely physical conditions, then that account makes it much more difficult to establish how divine providence becomes involved in its development.²⁹ Croce's avoidance of this element leaves many questions unanswered, for the ontology of mind has to be seen in relation to Vico's statements about the origin of gentile humanity within the context of sacred history, and it is a mistake to treat providence merely as a rhetorical addition to placate civil and ecclesiastical authority. This subject will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 9, *The meaning of return*, and the Conclusion.

Robin George Collingwood was also deeply influenced by Vico's analysis of history. In his *The Idea of History*,³⁰ Collingwood advances a thesis for the philosophy of history in which, firstly, history should be seen as the history of thought and, secondly, that history is essentially a re-creation of past thought. Collingwood's interpretation of history shares the same foundational principle of the *New Science*, which is that because history is "emphatically something made by the human mind, [it] is especially adapted to be an object of human knowledge".³¹ As Vico said, history is a product of the human mind, created by man *ex nihilo*, in the same way as the world is God's creation, and every detail of the fabric of human society is a human *factum*, and as such is possible to be fully known by the human mind. Collingwood neatly encapsulates Vico's historical scheme,

²⁹ This subject will be examined in Chapter 9, 'The meaning of return', and the Conclusion.

³⁰ Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

³¹ Collingwood 64-65.

and in particular is not distressed by Vico's solution of "the isolated actions of man and the divine plan that holds them together":

Here we reach for the first time a completely modern idea of what the subject-matter of history is. There is no antithesis between the isolated actions of man and the divine plan that holds them together, as there was for the Middle Ages; and, on the other hand, there is no suggestion that primitive man (in whom Vico was peculiarly interested) foresaw what was going to come of the development he was initiating: the plan of history is a wholly human plan, but it does not pre-exist in the shape of an unrealized intention to its own gradual realization.³²

Collingwood points out that Vico's objection to the Cartesian principle of truth as clear and distinct ideas is that it is, itself, a subjective or psychological criterion:

The fact that I think my ideas clear and distinct only proves that I believe them, not that they are true. In saying this, Vico is substantially agreeing with Hume, that belief is nothing but the vivacity of our perceptions.³³

Collingwood compares Vico's method of historical inquiry to Kant's in that, he says, both believed:

Mere scholarship will not do it, and mere philosophy will not do it; the two must be combined into a new form of thought owing something to both of them. Similarly, Vico, at the beginning of the century, demanded what he described as a union of philology and philosophy, a scholarly attention to detail and a philosophical attention to principles.³⁴

Collingwood says that Vico was the precursor to a new approach that was being undertaken by some historians in his own day which repudiated the method of an earlier time which relied on 'authority' and 'source':

³² Collingwood. 65.

³³ *Ibid.* 64.

³⁴ *Ibid.* 103.

The first person to make this point was Vico, at the beginning of the eighteenth century... Now, anyone who has read Vico, or even a second-hand version of some of his ideas, must have known that the important question about any statement contained in a source is not whether it is true or false, but what it means.³⁵

The second thesis of Collingwood's idea of history is that he sees it as the re-enactment of past thought. In this sense Collingwood shares Vico's thesis of the possibility of knowing history and the modifications of the human mind:

Unlike the natural scientist, the historian is not concerned with events as such at all. He is only concerned with those events which are the outwards expressions of thoughts, and is only concerned with these in so far as they express thought. At bottom, he is concerned with thoughts alone.³⁶

Whereas Vico thought that historical reconstruction can yield the general patterns of conceptualisation that belonged to an age, Collingwood goes further by presuming an almost literal understanding of the thinking of certain historical personages. A clear distinction between the two conceptions is gained by studying how Collingwood arrived at his conclusion and comparing it to how Vico came to believe that a science of history was possible. Their two versions of historical re-enactment are not the same.

Collingwood's influence on Isaiah Berlin was unmistakable.³⁷ Berlin states that historical reasoning, unlike that used in the natural sciences, uses a different kind of logic, one neither inductive nor deductive, but one that depends on the faculty of judgment to establish its truths. This does not mean that 'judgment' is not present in the

³⁵ Collingwood 259-260.

³⁶ Ibid. 217.

³⁷ Isaiah Berlin first read Collingwood's translation of Croce's *The Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* while a student of Collingwood's at Oxford; he was later to refer to it as an "eye-opening experience". See Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990) 8

natural sciences, but that contrasted with the objective, detached observational point of view of the natural scientist, the historian arms himself with the “knowledge of life”, which elsewhere he refers to as *Verstehen*:

The emphasis on this contrast, which runs through all Vico’s thought, is, in effect, the original formulation of the familiar and much controverted distinction between the methods and goals of *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft* – natural science as against humane studies, *Wissen* and *Verstehen*... Vico plainly regards such cognition [*Verstehen*] as being superior to anything based on mere observation, since it is knowledge of what we ourselves have in some sense created and of which we consequently possess an intimate knowledge *per causas* – ‘from within’ – a capacity with which men have been endowed from their earliest beginnings without consciously realizing this.³⁸

Berlin thus formulates a sort of ‘two truths hypothesis’ in which he draws a line between strictly scientific observational data on one hand and another mode of knowledge, to which he cites Vico as one of the sources,³⁹ in which the historian projects himself imaginatively into the mental activity of the past. In order for this to be philosophically valuable, he must be ever mindful of the psychic conditioning of his own concepts and prejudices. The advantage of this method of history was for Berlin, as it was for Vico, that it restores a social and moral dimension to philosophical inquiry, which is not infrequently considered superfluous when history is taken to be knowledge of ‘facts’:

This kind of imaginative projection of ourselves into the past, the attempt to capture concepts and categories that differ from those of the investigator by means of concepts and catego-

³⁸ Isaiah Berlin ‘Vico and Herder’, in *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976) 44.

³⁹ The others are: Herder, Hegel, Marx, Dilthey, and Weber.

ries that cannot but be his own, is a task he can never be sure that he is even beginning to achieve, yet is not permitted to abjure.⁴⁰

But Collingwood's ideas diverged sharply from Berlin and Vico's notion of what imaginative projection into the past meant. Even though they all shared the belief that the historian could know the past by sharing the same concepts as those who preceded him, for Collingwood this took the idea that the historian could quite literally "re-enact" past thought.⁴¹

As for Collingwood, his [Vico's] most gifted English disciple, his fruitful notion of the 'absolute presuppositions' of every culture, those basic categories and concepts of an age or culture which determine the shape of its mental activity and render its problems uniquely different from those of all other cultures, that does indeed derive from Vico, and perhaps from him alone. But when Collingwood adds to this notion the far more questionable one of a capacity to transport ourselves into the minds of persons or periods historically remote from us, a transcendental, timeless flight across the barrier of time, culminating in the metaphysical act of penetrating into the mind of Julius Caesar, or, let us say, the Puritan movement, or the Gothic Revival, he goes beyond his master. Vico speaks of the need to make the appalling effort of trying to adjust one's vision to the archaic world – the need to see it through deeply unfamiliar spectacles – but this is very different from the quasi-mystical act of literal self-identification with another mind and age of which Collingwood evidently thought himself capable.⁴²

⁴⁰ Isaiah Berlin, 'The Concept of Scientific History', in *Concepts and Categories: Philosophical Essays*, (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), 135-136.

⁴¹ Collingwood: "Thought can never be mere object. To know someone else's activity of thinking is possible only on the assumption that this same activity can be re-enacted in one's own mind. In that sense, to know 'what someone is thinking' (or 'has thought') involves thinking it for oneself. To reject this conclusion means denying that we have any right to speak of acts of thought at all, except such as take place in our own minds, and embracing the doctrine that my mind is the only one that exists. Against anyone who accepts that form of solipsism I shall not stay to argue. I am considering how history, as the knowledge of past thoughts (acts of thought), is possible; and I am only concerned to show that it is impossible except on the view that to know another's act of thought involves repeating it for oneself". 288.

⁴² Berlin, *Concept*, 118-19.

Berlin's own understanding of the reconstruction or apprehension of ancient minds is formed by his reading of paragraph 331 of the *New Science*:

By 'modifications' he appears to mean what we should mean by the stages of the growth, or of the range or direction, of human thought, imagination, will, feeling, into which any man equipped with sufficient *fantasia* (as well as knowledge acquired by rational methods) can 'enter'. Vico nowhere, so far as I know, fully or exactly explains the way in which men understand other men – 'know their minds', grasp their goals, outlooks, ways of thinking, feeling, acting. He does not account for our knowledge of other selves – individual or collective, living or dead – by invoking the language of empathy, or analogical reasoning, or intuition, or participation in the unity of the World Spirit. That has been left to his interpreters. He rests his case on his conviction that what men have made, other men, because their minds are those of men, can always, in principle, 'enter into'.⁴³

For Berlin, the principal idea of the *New Science* is found in "the unity – and the parallelism – which obtains between the necessary succession of the phases of a civilization and the development of mental attributes and powers in the growing individual – Vico's *idée maîtresse* – the Renaissance notion of the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm is clearly central".⁴⁴ This is the paragraph from the *New Science* that Berlin is referring to:

The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being [*nascimento*] at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being.⁴⁵

The distinction between natural science and humane studies is a pivotal turn in Vico's epistemology, for Berlin it is "the opening shot in a battle which from that moment

⁴³ Berlin 47.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 35.

⁴⁵ NS 147.

has never ceased".⁴⁶ It is the idea that institutions and minds and languages are never "wholly translatable without residue into any other, for each categorises reality in different ways",⁴⁷ that has had the greatest impact on philosophy and history, according to Berlin.

In *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography*⁴⁸ Joseph Mali argues that Vico was the first thinker to conceive of myth as a source of knowledge for historical, linguistic, and epistemological understanding.⁴⁹ Mali writes:

In the *New Science* he transposed the notion of *verum as factum* from pure conventions (such as geometrical figures) to "more real" cultural and social conventions (myths, laws, states, and the like). Not until that last work of his life did he come to realize that practically all our "civil institutions" are as artificial and conventional as geometrical forms are and that consequently our knowledge of the human world results from what is equally an essentially constructive activity: we know this world because, and only to the extent that, we still make or share its constitutive ideal fictions, its myths.⁵⁰

It was implicit in Vico's method that myths were neither entirely theoretical constructions nor empirical records. Vico believed that myths are the representation by peoples of universal truths, and while their specific content may be unique to each society or civilisation, their underlying forms and essential properties remain unchanged and shared by all. It is this discovery, that there is a fundamental unity in the diversity of human change, which Vico considered to be his outstanding achievement, the "master-

⁴⁶ Berlin 31.

⁴⁷ Ibid. 167.

⁴⁸ Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁴⁹ Fully half of the *New Science*, Books Two and Three, 'Poetic Wisdom' and 'Discovery of the True Homer' respectively, are concerned with establishing Vico's thesis that true understanding of past states of mind was possible through reading myths as records of universal thought patterns.

⁵⁰ Mali. 65.

key” of his science. The implications of this discovery for his conception of mind are that it allows him to speak of a ‘common mental dictionary’ that all peoples share, and the origins and meanings of ideas contained in this lexicon could be deciphered through a process of philological and historical reconstruction. Vico complained that both Plato and Bacon, two of his four acknowledged “major thinkers”,⁵¹ had missed the true meaning of myth; Plato because he failed to see the historical and political lesson encrypted in the Prometheus myth, which is that divine and later human authority should be respected; and in Bacon because of his attempt to rationalize and purify the barbaric and primitive elements of myth through an anachronistic reading, thus failing to understand the nature of the society in question and the moral function the myth served in that society’s state of development:

What Vico perceived in and through ancient mythology was, then, a new materialistic, but not a deterministic, theory of social life and history. Vico acknowledged the primacy of material necessities over spiritual aspirations, but he did not reduce these latter creations of the imagination to conditions of production, as his later, more vulgar, Marxist admirers have all too easily done.⁵²

Many of Vico’s interpretations of specific myths are now known to be imprecise, but Mali points out that his method was fundamentally sound:

Vico’s ‘discovery’ of the deep historicity of language is akin to what modern cultural theorists have eventually come to proclaim as their own discovery; to use Wittgenstein’s words, ‘a whole mythology is deposited in our language’.⁵³

⁵¹ The other two are Tacitus and Grotius.

⁵² Mali 80.

⁵³ Ibid. 76.

But just as Vico warned against anachronistic interpretations of ancient narratives (he called this the *conceit of scholars*), he also made distinctions between the truths in ethics and politics and those that can be discovered in nature. Mali gives an example of this:

For what is really novel and important in his notion of the “principles of humanity” is the hermeneutical, not the empirical, claim, namely his assertion that if any cross-cultural understanding is possible at all, it must assume and pursue certain absolute norms or, to use a modern phrase, “limiting notions,” of morality, which determine the range within which various forms of life can be exercised and can be recognized as human.... The truth about truth is that ultimately all our moral and social theories are (or at least should be rendered) mythological: they grow out of and express “the public grounds of truth” of specific historical communities and civilizations.⁵⁴

Vico accepted the independent reality of both types of truth in the same way that Aristotle understood different subject matters require different treatment.⁵⁵ Mali’s study brings to the fore the foundational ideas behind the ‘limiting notions’ and the ‘public grounds of truth’ which are not infrequently lost sight of when so many unfamiliar facts are jumbled together one after the other.

Paolo Rossi’s *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*⁵⁶ also explores the question of meaning behind sacred and profane myth and history in the *New Science*. The work’s focus is Vico’s treatment of two divergent accounts of human history. Much of Vico’s conception of mind as the maker of

⁵⁴ Mali 82-83.

⁵⁵ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, translated by J.A.K. Thomson (London: Penguin Books, 1976). In Book Six, v., Aristotle contrasts *phronēsis*, prudence or practical wisdom, with science and art. *Phronēsis* is “not science because what can be done is a variable, and not art because action and production are generically different... What remains, then, is that it is a true state (developed in accordance with a true theory or principal), reasoned, and capable of action with regard to things that are good or bad for man”. The man who practices such wisdom is known as the *phronimos*, the ‘practically wise man’.

⁵⁶ Paolo Rossi, *The Dark Abyss of Time: The History of the Earth and the History of Nations from Hooke to Vico*, translated by Lydia G. Cochrane (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

history and the nature of knowledge depends on their reading, and as the direction of history is largely determined by the 'modifications of the mind', ultimately the metaphysics of the *New Science* is affected by it:

There is little point, for example, in stating that (1) in the *Scienza Nuova* the two parallel histories never seem to meet; (2) in the *Scienza Nuova* we can find more a faith in Providence in general than in Christian Providence; (3) Vico's meditations are much more concerned with the world of the nations than with sacred history and, consequently, the biblical datum is often given parenthetically; (4) as soon as it is possible to "delineate a human history with documents and references to events of the history of nations, sacred history passes to the background."⁵⁷

Vico believed that the history of the Hebrew people was the most ancient and that it could provide the keystone to the structure of his own account of history. For Vico, sacred history served as a bridge between the ahistorical dark ages that preceded the Western tradition and the beginnings of profane history in ancient Greece. Rossi quotes from Vico's *Universal Law* on the importance of sacred history for establishing a sure origin and course of profane history:

If Sacred History shows us the events that occurred *while* the obscure and fabulous age was taking place in profane history, we are in possession of an intermediary by means of which the history of the obscure and fabulous age can come to touch the history of real time. For this reason, what has thus far been said, with truth, about the dimensions of the terrestrial world, that is, that they draw their certainty from the certain measures of the heavens, should also be said concerning the truth of the civil world: the truth of profane events should be demanded of Sacred History alone.⁵⁸

The biblical account of mankind contained in *Genesis* gives Vico a touchstone from which to measure the distance gentile humanity had strayed from the Hebrew

⁵⁷ Rossi 176.

⁵⁸ G.B. Vico, *On Universal Law* [1720].

ideal of rationality. As Rossi says, Vico “forcefully rejected any attempt to ‘illustrate’ sacred history by means of profane history”.⁵⁹ On the contrary, he says, Vico aimed to clarify the origins of the history of the gentile peoples by showing how it was related to sacred history “by means of the start of Greek history, the source of all we possess about profane antiquity”.⁶⁰ Just as the natural scientist benefits from the “certain measures of the heavens” to establish his reckonings in this world, so too, in the civil world, the philosopher’s quest to find a point of origin from which to calculate the movement of human society can be found in revealed sacred history. Rossi writes:

For Vico there were only two hypotheses that could explain the origin of the pagan nations: either they were born of the conscious reflection of learned men, or else from human instinct buried in some beastlike men.⁶¹

In the first case, that is clearly impossible, because for Vico pagan history begins after the Great Flood with bestial men, the *bestioni*, who since becoming separated from their Hebrew roots have lost reflective reasoning that would enable them to plan the founding of social institutions. But in the second case, the ‘buried’ human instinct, which is a remnant of Hebrew ante-diluvium man, would account for the common nature of civil institutions spread across the unfolding of universal history, and whose principles are revealed in sacred history:

Vico’s achievement – and all of his interpreters are in agreement on this – consisted in having made his way through that world of the fabulous and that obscure age in which it was difficult even to penetrate. Anyone who discusses that world has to refuse to project into it the categories of reason and must realize that that humanity was different from our own, that those

⁵⁹ Rossi 176.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 180.

⁶¹ 187.

minds were 'not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized,' but were instead 'entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body.'⁶²

Rossi provides well-argued interpretations of many of Vico's positions *vis-à-vis* sacred narrative, and these go a long way in elucidating many questions the *New Science* raises about innate or *à priori* mental faculties that are inherent in any argument that involves evidence from the Bible for a common human nature.

In this work⁶³ Leon Pompa's position is that Vico fails to convincingly demonstrate that history in the *New Science* follows the pattern of the *ideal eternal history*:

No matter how attractive his general theory of emergent rationality may be, he can neither establish the necessity for the determinate sequence involved in the 'ideal eternal history' nor show that it is necessary that any nation should have such a nature. In other words, he cannot show that there is a *necessary* sequence in the history of *any* nation, let alone that of all nations.⁶⁴

The reason Pompa says this is insufficient is that Vico's historical claims depend on the concept of providence, which he takes to be unscientific. In Vico's *ideal eternal history* human and divine mind co-operate to achieve a common end in full-blown rationality. In response to a passage from the *New Science*⁶⁵ in which Vico says that human history is a product of both human mind and providential design, Pompa writes:

Here there is a strange mixture of claims. We are told simultaneously both that the world is a product of man and that it is the product of a supermind, which uses man's particular ends to secure its own wider ends, including the preservation of man.... Thus, on the one hand, we are told that the world is not a product of man, on the grounds that through the unintended conse-

⁶² Rossi 180.

⁶³ Leon Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

⁶⁴ Pompa 189.

⁶⁵ NS 1108

quences of his actions new institutions arise. And on the other hand, we are told that it is a product of mind because men create it by intelligence, by choice, and by making uniform intelligent choices on the same occasions... Faced with these apparently different claims, it is not surprising that there exists a wide range of interpretations of Vico's concept of providence.⁶⁶

However, the notion of man and God as co-workers in fulfilling divine purpose was not Vico's invention; it is, after all, the basis of Talmudic Judaism and is not unknown to other religions. What Pompa proposes, instead, is a reading that makes the distinction between the occasion and the cause of historical change:

The occasion was the aims of individuals in their various social capacities – the fathers, for example, abusing their legitimate paternal power over their clients – but the cause was a wider conception, the rational force of which was felt by all concerned.... The cause is the new conception which arises from progressively more rational reflection upon faults in the principle revealed by the breakdown which occasions the reflection. 'Providence' thus becomes the name for a higher wisdom, and understanding of more adequate concepts, which develops in nations in the course of their historical experience.⁶⁷

Pompa appears to explain "the rational force of which was felt by all concerned" as a sort of innate principle of justice and equity, and by that to obviate the necessity for providence as the causal agent in history. This is somewhat ironic, for Vico says that contained within the power of *conatus*, which is bestowed by providence on man, is the drive to achieve universal justice.⁶⁸ If this reading is accurate, then Pompa seems to have merely substituted one of Vico's own explanatory principles for another.

⁶⁶ Pompa 161.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 163.

⁶⁸ NS 340: "But these first men, who later became the princes of the gentile nations, must have done their thinking under the strong impulsion of violent passions, as beasts do... [but] From this thought [of a frightful divinity] must have sprung the *conatus* proper to the human will, to hold in check the motions impressed on the mind by the body, so as either to quiet them altogether, as becomes the wise man, or at least to direct them to better use, as becomes the civil man. This control over the motion of their bodies is

II

Rhetorical and philological studies

Vico's aim in the *New Science* was to integrate philosophy and philology in order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of how the human mind operates in universal history. For him, rhetoric had epistemological value and needed to be brought back to the position it once held in the pursuit of rational argumentation, before it became superfluous to philosophical enquiry. Vico believed that the clear exposition of ideas required continual formation, incorporation, and reformation into a communal body of knowledge, and for him rhetoric was the best instrument for establishing what Pascal called the "*esprit de finesse*", a humanistic form of ratiocination that includes what we would call today both objective and subjective elements for consideration. This form of thinking is contrasted with the "*esprit de géométrie*" which Pascal, and Vico, associated with a mechanical frame of mind in which "calculation", rather than "reflection", becomes the primary mode of thought. Vico was not unaware of the ancient complaint against rhetoric that it was dangerous because it tried to convince through subtle plays on the emotions rather than forthrightly basing a case on reason alone.⁶⁹ But the whole point Vico was making in his epistemological theory was that it is unrealistic to expect any other kind of reasoning that does not involve the emotions; the extent and the method by which emotion needed to be included was the question, not whether it should be involved at all.

certainly an effect of the freedom of human choice, and thus of free will, which is the home and seat of all the virtues, and among the others of justice".

⁶⁹ Vico's position on rhetoric and knowledge is most strongly argued in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* [1709] (*De Nostri Temporis Studiorum Rationae*) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

In his *Truth and Method*,⁷⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer firmly places Vico within a humanistic tradition and casts him as one of the founders of modern hermeneutic inquiry, someone who clearly grasped the distinction between the ancient Greek concepts of *sophia* (wisdom) and *phronēsis* (common-sense) and their relevance to knowledge. Gadamer says that Vico was not denying the validity of mathematical methodology, as found in rationalist inquiry, as much as he was delineating the limits of modern critical science. He believed that in order to understand those boundaries we still need the ancient concepts of common-sense and eloquence as guides to ensure that knowledge remains meaningful to the community at large. Gadamer points out that Vico's concept of common-sense "is the sense of what is right and of the common good that is to be found in all men; moreover, it is a sense that is acquired through living in the community and is determined by its structures and aims".⁷¹ Gadamer traces back to the Roman Stoic doctrine of *sensus communis* Vico's concern with the ethical dimension of knowledge.

Gadamer thought it an impressive achievement that Vico could retain and promote the concept of common sense, given the prevailing "intellectualization of the concept of community".⁷² He offers an example of the distinctly new meaning that the term had acquired by the late eighteenth century:

By contrast, Kant's version of this idea in his *Critique of Judgment* has quite a different emphasis. There is no longer any systematic place for the concept's basic moral sense. As we know, he developed his moral philosophy in explicit opposition to the doctrine of "moral feeling"

⁷⁰ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode)* [1960]2nd edition, translated by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000).

⁷¹ Gadamer 22.

⁷² *Ibid.* 32.

that had been worked out in English philosophy. Thus he totally excluded the concept of *sensus communis* from moral philosophy.⁷³

Gadamer thinks that Vico deserves attention not just for bringing forward into the modern age the wealth of ancient tradition in humanistic studies, but also for showing the way toward the possibility of a new type of historical knowledge, one that established “the homogeneity of subject and object”.⁷⁴ Gadamer brings out Vico’s pioneering role in integrating the means of discourse with the subject of discourse. This turn is decisive in Vico’s epistemology and his theory of historical understanding, for Vico’s basic premise in both is that thinking is as much a product of the concepts formed through rhetorical tropes as it is of the percepts that are observed.⁷⁵

In *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition*⁷⁶ Ernesto Grassi studies the roots of the Italian Humanistic tradition and its ideas of rhetoric. He draws the conclusion that the subject of topics, or the finding of arguments, is basic to philosophy, and that rhetoric is prior to literal speech. The concept of *verisimile*, which Vico develops in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* [1709] and in *On the Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* [1710], is examined:

[T]he historical aspects of the realization of the mind are *never eternally valid*, never absolutely “true,” because they always emerge within limited situations bound in space and time;

⁷³ Gadamer 32.

⁷⁴ Ibid. 222.

⁷⁵ Gadamer: “I would like to see more recognition of the fact that this is the realm hermeneutics shares with rhetoric: the realm of arguments that are convincing (which is not the same as logically compelling). It is the realm of practice and humanity in general, and its province is not where the power of “iron-clad conclusions” must be accepted without discussion, nor where emancipatory reflection is certain of its “contrafactual agreements,” but rather where controversial issues are decided by reasonable considerations. The arts of rhetoric and argumentation (and their silent analogue, thoughtful deliberation with oneself) are at home here. If rhetoric appeals to the feelings, as has long been clear, that in no way means it falls outside the realm of the reasonable. Vico rightly assigns it a special value: *copia*, the abundance of viewpoints”. 568.

⁷⁶ Ernesto Grassi, *Rhetoric as Philosophy: The Humanist Tradition* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1980).

i.e., they are probable and seem to be true {*verisimile*}, true only within the confines of “here” and “now,” in which the needs and problems that confront human beings are met.⁷⁷

Grassi sets out to reconstruct the historical and philosophical background as a way to frame the problem of how to evaluate rhetoric’s role in philosophy. He wants to show how rhetoric has acquired, since the Enlightenment, the meaning of something having “a purely technical, exterior, and practical aim of persuading,” as opposed to “an essentially philosophical structure and function”.⁷⁸

Although the rationalist preference is to formulate knowledge through apodictic, demonstrative language, Grassi is quick to point out that the root meaning of apodictic (*apodeiknumi* – to prove) “means to *show* something to be something, on the basis of something”.⁷⁹ This type of speech traces the meaning given to phenomena back to their foundational principles, or *archai*. But the *archai* in any proof cannot be the object of a prior apodictic term, for in that case they would not be foundational assertions:

Such speech (indicative or allusive {*semainein*}) is immediately a “showing”- and for this reason “figurative” or “imaginative,” and thus in the original sense “theoretical” {*theorein* – i.e., to see}. It is metaphorical, i.e., it shows something which has a sense, and this means that to the figure, to that which is shown, the speech transfers {*metapherein*} a signification; in this way the speech which realizes this showing “leads before the eyes” {*phainesthai*} a significance. This speech is and must be in its structure an imaginative language.⁸⁰

Vico’s main protest against critical philosophy was that it excluded whole realms (poetry, rhetoric, political education, history) from serious philosophical debate by its exclusive demand for apodictic or demonstrative knowledge. He believed that a crite-

⁷⁷ Grassi 10.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 19.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid. 20.

tion of *probability* (*verisimile*) was wholly appropriate when judging things of a contingent nature, like human actions. The exclusion of these “second truths” from foundational principles in rationalist philosophy meant that their role would be limited to comparisons between conditional objects, but could not contribute to universal knowledge as such.

Like Grassi, Michael Mooney takes the position that the true importance of rhetoric is contained in what it reveals about the underlying structures of reasoning, rather than simply as a toolbox of linguistic artifice. In *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric*⁸¹ Mooney states that “among the many truths of the *New Science* there is one that is deepest - it is the truth that language, mind, and society are but three modes of a common reality”.⁸² Although Mooney places Vico within the tradition of the “public” philosopher⁸³, he goes beyond that connection and focuses more on the question of how the mind emerges from a state of bodily senses:

What can it mean to think through the body, to reason with a mind that is torn with passions and immersed in the senses? It means to reason as a rhetor must reason when speaking *inter rudes*, arguing among the simple who cannot take in a complicated argument.⁸⁴

⁸¹ Michael Mooney, *Vico in the Tradition of Rhetoric* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

⁸² Mooney ix.

⁸³ Ibid. xi: “There is in the West a persistent line of thinking that has flourished from time to time, and never so brilliantly as among the ancient Romans, which holds that language is primary in culture, metaphors a necessity, and jurisprudence our highest achievement. This was the position of the ancient Sophists – of the more thoughtful ones, if not of those who so rightly exercised Socrates. It was the position of the “prudential” Aristotle, the Aristotle of the *Ethics* and *Politics*, of the *Topics*, the *Rhetoric*, and the *Poetics*. It was consummately the position of the “reformed” school of Roman orators, headed by Cicero, and of the “civic humanists” of the early Italian Renaissance, who in their writings and practice gave new meaning and dignity to the *vita active*. And it was the position of Giambattista Vico, who not only received and cherished the tradition, but looked deeply into it, saw what its principles implied, and so made ready for the great social theorists of the nineteenth century and our own. That is the thesis of this work”.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

Vico's first imaginative universal, the founding metaphor of Jove, is produced when the mind is awakened by thunder. The first steps in understanding these sensations are akin to a rhetor's reasoning in images; that is, by taking a global view of an event or a thing, then dividing that into its various aspects, establishing a position in relation to them, and finally persuading others of its validity. Mooney's treatment of Book Two of the *New Science*, 'Poetic Wisdom', is a clear exposition of that vital section. 'Poetic Wisdom' is essentially a history of the mind's development, a record of the growth of consciousness.

Ever since the logic of modern science replaced humanistic reasoning as a standard for rational deliberation, the concept of truth, at least in the West, has been associated with the 'objective' and 'absolute'; any truth claims falling short of that standard are typically qualified as 'fuzzy' or 'vague'. John Schaeffer in *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism*⁸⁵ attempts to show that Vico sought to re-establish the rhetorical concept of *sensus communis* as a key component to the epistemological claims found in the *New Science*. Schaeffer reaches back to the Platonic account of the concept as *doxa*, which are the opinions of ordinary men, and deemed mere "hearsay or illusory knowledge built upon fleeting sense impressions".⁸⁶ Schaeffer says that *sensus communis* provides a foundation for philosophic reasoning in a society and rhetoric may be said to provide the boundaries of social discourse:

Sensus communis becomes for Vico the affective, pre-reflective and somatic quality of language, created when both language and human institutions were formed".⁸⁷

⁸⁵ John D. Schaeffer, *Sensus Communis: Vico, Rhetoric, and the Limits of Relativism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1990).

⁸⁶ Schaeffer 2.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 151.

This is contrasted with *episteme*, or “firm knowledge grounded in the forms and grasped through dialectical reasoning”.⁸⁸ He then describes how in Aristotle *sensus communis* acquired a more elevated status as a power that could compare and judge the acts of the other senses, and was the “frontal root of all the senses”.⁸⁹ For the Romans it meant:

[A]sense of propriety, the shared but unstated mores of the community, the manners by which the community acts as a community. In short, the term means a conventional wisdom but with a decidedly ethical cast”.⁹⁰

In the complicated political and social environment of Vico’s Naples there existed a millennia-old tradition of jurisprudence that was heavily dependent on orally-established precedents, customs, and usages,⁹¹ and Schaeffer thinks this process of legalistic reasoning was carried over by Vico in the method he adopted to integrate philology and philosophy in the pursuit of historical truth. According to Schaeffer, what Vico did was to synthesize the Aristotelian and Roman ideas of *sensus communis*, and made of it a principle upon which the mind could stay connected to the public world and thereby remain safe from the alienating scepticism of Cartesian rationalism. Schaeffer focuses on *sensus communis* as “an essentially oral concept that permits Vico to exfoliate the unity of rhetoric and ethics that characterized Italian humanism”.⁹² For Vico and other defenders of Neapolitan legal practice it would not do to merely substitute Cartesian rationality for *consensus* as a basis for legal theory, for rationality does not exhaust the question of what is rational or determine who should wield power:

⁸⁸ Schaeffer 2.

⁸⁹ Ibid 2.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ 47.

⁹² 5.

Vico's concept of *sensus communis* constitutes the sort of epistemological *cum* ethical sense that challenges modern relativism and for which modern ethicists call. It exists, however, not within the tradition of ethics but within the tradition of rhetoric.⁹³

The debate between the Cartesian devaluing of probability, and thus *sensus communis*, which arises from the perceptions of similitude in the public sphere, and the dismissal of common knowledge and accepted opinions that Aristotle says provide a basis for probable argument,⁹⁴ Vico would defend as important as the critical intellect, and far from being an instance of vain *sprezzatura*, it is rather perspicacity that rhetoric engenders, and therein lies its epistemological value.

Another study which sets out to show that Vico believed the road to knowledge could not be travelled without the company of the arts is Giuseppe Mazzotta's *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico*.⁹⁵ Mazzotta's thesis is that poetry is the centre of the *New Science* because for Vico "The key to the unity of all the arts and sciences is poetry".⁹⁶ Poetry is true history, the *vera narratio*, which allows access to "the very foundations of humanity's time-bound existence".⁹⁷

There is no sustained reading of the *New Science*, of which I am aware, that is carried out from within the essentially literary or poetic viewpoint that Vico claims as the key to his science.⁹⁸

Mazzotta underscores the fact that, for Vico, the Aristotelian idea of the mean was needed to offset the modern idea of, theoretically, boundless liberty which he considered harmful to the unity of knowledge. In his essay *On the Heroic Mind* what Vico pro-

⁹³ Schaeffer 160.

⁹⁴ Aristotle, *Rhetoric* 1235a.

⁹⁵ Giuseppe Mazzotta, *The New Map of the World: The Poetic Philosophy of Giambattista Vico* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁹⁶ Mazzotta xii.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.* 10.

⁹⁸ xii.

poses, on the contrary, is a “cultivation of knowledge as a whole”,⁹⁹ in order to achieve a “totalizing universe of learning”.¹⁰⁰ Mazzotta says Vico’s age was intolerant of any means to knowledge whereby the imagination and the passions could harmoniously operate to achieve a wholesome individual. Vico thought that the psychic health of people in society depended on a rational balance between the passionate and the intelligible parts and would require “a poetic representation of the whole and not an abstract statement of principle”.¹⁰¹ Thus, Mazzotta says the ‘new map of the world’ that Vico draws is one in which all epochs point to the present state of man:

The rejection of rhetoric... is not possible for Vico, who, like the humanists of the Italian Renaissance, knows that rhetoric is the act wherein man’s hard choices are debated. Indeed, if the elimination of rhetoric were possible, it would not be desirable. Eliminating rhetoric is tantamount to eliminating history.¹⁰²

In an age of rationalism, characterised by secularized natural law theory, Vico turned, instead, to the study of religious practices and divination. And by reviving the tradition of the *theologia rhetorica*, in which poetry, politics, history, philosophy, and theology were united in a single vision of man’s meaning and purpose, he theologizes politics and politicizes theology. Ultimately, the acquisition of wisdom was Vico’s aim, not mere knowledge,¹⁰³ and Mazzotta comments:

The epistemological universe of Descartes, rooted as it is in the cogito, assumes that thought is an enduring, stable state, whereas for Vico the mind continuously experiences modifications or what in the Middle Ages were known as *alterations*. The notion of the indefinite and

⁹⁹ G.B. Vico, *On the Heroic Mind* (translated by Elizabeth Sewell and Anthony C. Sirignano), in *Vico and Contemporary Thought* (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1976) 244.

¹⁰⁰ Mazzotta 95.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* 11.

¹⁰² 89.

¹⁰³ NS 364: “True wisdom, then, should teach the knowledge of divine institutions in order to conduct human institutions to the highest good”.

shifting quality of the mind introduces for Vico the principle of contingency into the assumed stability of the cogito. The Cartesian formula “cogito, ergo sum” ends up in the configuration of the mind as an isolated, nondialectical structure, essentially *discontinuous* with the constraints of material reality. What is more, the provisional certainty which the act of thinking conveys is made to appear as an enduring, nontemporal totality.¹⁰⁴

Mazzotta’s interpretation is that man is both mind and body, and the two are joined by language. The Cartesian separation of consciousness and extended matter is bridged by imagination; as Mazzotta writes, “For Vico the real is indistinguishable from the simulacra of the imagination and from rational thought processes”.¹⁰⁵ The ground of man’s wisdom is, for Vico, never far from myth, poetry, and rhetoric: “These principles of metaphysics, logic and morals, issued from the market place of Athens”.¹⁰⁶ Vico insisted throughout his life and writings that public contact is as important for the nourishment of the mind as it is for the body. The danger to the body politic of philosophic isolation is that it leads to solipsism and ultimately social paralysis, the state Vico referred to as the “barbarism of reflection”.

III

Epistemological studies

Vico’s account of the metaphorical construction of concepts (the imaginative and intelligible universals) and his views on probability (*verisimile*) as a criterion for truth have generated interest among historians of philosophy and philosophers of mind alike. But perhaps the most important conclusion that can be drawn from Vico’s statements on

¹⁰⁴ Mazzotta 105.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 163.

¹⁰⁶ NS 1043.

language, taken together, is that they form a hypothesis that thought with propositional content is a product of language. Vico believes that concepts are first acquired in non-rational ways (through physiological stimuli in the imaginative universals) and later by learning (through the formation and confirmation of hypotheses in the intellectual universals). The following studies probe Vico's account of how mental content is acquired and the implications of this to the theory of knowledge.

Donald Phillip Verene's most important contribution, among many, in Vico studies is his extended discussion of the key concept of the imaginative universals, which is the subject of his *Vico's Science of Imagination*.¹⁰⁷ Verene writes that "This conception of an original mentality (of mankind) that ordered experience in terms of imaginative universals is the "master key" of this new science".¹⁰⁸ Verene thinks that Vico wanted his new science to provide a metaphysical understanding of the human mind. He observes that human thinking begins for Vico in the image, not the idea, and in this way his account differs substantially from certain philosophers, including Descartes, Locke, Kant, and Hegel.¹⁰⁹

Verene notes that in Descartes the idea ends up becoming as certain of itself as the contemplated subject, but for Vico the imaginative universals start with an image and become metaphor by the power of the imagination.¹¹⁰ Verene says that metaphors are not simply analogies but rather original acts of creation – "the primary operations of the human mind"¹¹¹ – that represent the true beginnings of human thought and history.

¹⁰⁷ Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

¹⁰⁸ Verene 66

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. 80.

¹¹⁰ Paragraphs 428-455 of Book 2, 'Poetic Wisdom', contain Vico's most extended discussion on the origins of languages and letters.

¹¹¹ NS 496.

Thus, according to Verene, for Vico the phenomenal nature of thought is rooted in the image and it is there that concepts are formed. The importance of this premise is that it implies that all types of thinking, whether metaphorical or rational, have a foundation in the image:

For Vico, the beginning point of mind, like the primitive world, is filled with benign and malignant forces. In the theory of the *universal fantastico* Vico makes the question of the given the basis of his conception of knowledge. He asks a completely new epistemological question. He does not ask how the mind functions in relation to the object to produce knowledge, or even the less profitable question of whether the mind has objects actually before it, whether it has an external world... Vico asks how the mind comes to have something before it at all. In this way he moves behind the given. By asking how there ever comes to be something, rather than nothing, before the mind, Vico is able to see knowledge as beginning directly with the image.¹¹²

Verene has brought to the forefront the importance of the image in Vico's account of the origins of language and thought. He has stridently sought to make the case here and in other writings that Vico's organic thesis that thought is always grounded in a somatic relationship with the environment deserves further consideration in educational theory and cognitive science.

The subject of Hayden White's "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*"¹¹³ is how the structure and transformations of language affect the forms of society. White's thesis is, *in nuce*, that Vico's position in the *New Science* was that figures of speech reflect the ages of man in which they are associated, and that changes in human consciousness parallel changes in speech:

¹¹² Verene 81.

¹¹³ Hayden White, "The Tropics of History: The Deep Structure of the *New Science*", in *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, edited by Giorgio Tagliacozzo and Donald Phillip Verene (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

For at the interior of Vico's thought there resides a principle of interpretation, or to use a recently revived term, "hermeneutical principle," of which no other thinker in Europe prior to Hegel even glimpsed the possibility. This principle derives from the perception, original with Vico in the form that he gave to it, that speech provides the key for interpreting cultural phenomena and the categories by which the evolutionary stages of a given culture can be characterized. Here the basic distinction is between poetic expression on the one side and discursive prose representation on the other. The former is conceived to be a creative and active force by which consciousness confiscates its world; the latter a receptive and passive operation in which "things as they are" are mirrored. The effect of these two aspects of speech on consciousness sets up a tension, within consciousness itself, that generates a tendency of thought to transcend itself and to create out of the sensed inadequacy of language to its object the conditions for the exercise of its essential freedom.¹¹⁴

White focuses on the origins of human knowledge in "the onomathetic powers of primitive men, the power of 'naming' objects, of distinguishing them from other objects".¹¹⁵ He investigates the processes by which primitive man gains a degree of control over a hostile nature through the imaginative use of speech. His analysis of how this is accomplished comprises the mastery of four tropes: metaphor, synecdoche, metonymy, and irony. Of these, metaphor is, according to Vico "the most luminous and therefore the most necessary and frequent",¹¹⁶ and White says of Vico that his "theory of metaphorical transformation serves as the model for a theory of the autotransformation of human consciousness in history".¹¹⁷ The other forms, metonymy and synecdoche, continue the process of transformation.

¹¹⁴ White 70-71.

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 71.

¹¹⁶ NS 404.

¹¹⁷ White 72.

White contends that each of Vico's three stages – the religious, poetic, and prosaic - has its own distinctive form of human nature and that there are “generic similarities between transitions in societies and the tropological transformations of speech”:¹¹⁸

1. The transition from primal metaphorical identifications by naming external reality in terms taken from the most particular and most sensible ideas of the parts of the body and the emotional states to metonymic reductions is analogous to the transition in society from the rule of the gods to the rule of aristocracies;
2. The transition from metonymic reductions to synecdochic constructions of wholes from parts, genera from species, and so on is analogous to the transition from aristocratic rule to democratic rule; and
3. The transition from synecdochic constructions to ironic statement is analogous to the transition from democracies ruled by law to the decadent societies whose members have no respect for the law.¹¹⁹

White's main contribution is in elucidating Vico's position that human consciousness and figures of speech run on parallel tracks. In so far as speech is reflective of the particular state of consciousness that characterizes any given stage of development, Vico's definition of human nature as “properly only mind, body, and speech”¹²⁰ gains further cogency. What this formulation clearly states is that without language human thought, as we know it, would either not exist or be something altogether different. Taking that as a working premise, Vico showed that with the stultification of language and thought, the *barbarism of reflection*, which occurs in the later period of the ‘age of man’, social cohesion suffers a degeneration, and this leads to a loss of the acquired traits which constitute ‘human nature’.

¹¹⁸ White 76.

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 78.

¹²⁰ NS 1045.

The following three studies are representative of recent literature that draws attention to Vico's connection to epistemological theories of pragmatism, constructivism, and pluralism. What these theories have in common is a rejection of a computationalist model of mind that views the mind akin to an information processing system and thought to a form of computation. L. M. Palmer builds the case in her article¹²¹ that many of Vico's core ideas are reflected in pragmatist thinking, however widely that term is defined. Palmer clearly lists the "fundamental and common themes that all pragmatists share" and shows how they very closely resemble key Vichian notions of knowledge:

First, all pragmatists reject the foundational metaphor of knowledge. In various ways they all reject the notion that knowledge has a fixed foundation....*Second*, all pragmatists reject Cartesianism....*Third*, all pragmatists with counted exceptions such as Rorty, Habermas and possibly Lewis, naturalized the mind....*Fourth*, all accepted as the proper object of inquiry exactly what Descartes had considered gibberish: history, rhetoric and literature.¹²²

Palmer says that "the rejection of the myth of the given and the spectator theory of knowledge is a constant theme of Vico's writings".¹²³ For Vico, God is the creator of nature, but the human mind is a maker: it is the God of art.¹²⁴ She compares Vico's epistemic principle *Verum-Factum convertuntur* to William James' statements on beliefs that they are useful because true or true because useful:

James seems to identify truth with the function – usefulness – of what is done or made, while Vico seems to identify truth with the action or making or the product of the action, that is

¹²¹ L.M. Palmer, 'Vico and Pragmatism: New Variations on Vichian Themes', *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Summer, 2002, Vol. XXXVIII, No. 3, 433-440.

¹²² Palmer 435-436.

¹²³ *Ibid.* 436.

¹²⁴ Vico's first inaugural lecture, 1699: *Tandem Deus Naturae Artifex: Animus certium fas sit dicere, Deus.*

the artefact. However, for both authors, truth and thus knowing require the participation of the ones for whom it is useful or the ones for whom something is done or made.¹²⁵

Palmer points out that it has been said that “Vico’s constructive theory of knowledge commits him to conventionalist, intuitionist, or formalist positions”,¹²⁶ but these are the same problems that beset Peirce, James, and Dewey in trying to make a principled distinction between the analytic and the synthetic. This is the issue that occupies the next author.

The social psychiatrist Arnold Modell notes in this study¹²⁷ that “the construction of meaning requires the use of emotions and feelings as markers of value”.¹²⁸ Modell categorically rejects the correspondence theory of truth and says:

There is... a growing literature within neurobiology and cognitive science that refutes the concept of representation, and I would venture that the lifespan of the concept of representation is limited. The mind/brain does not represent or mirror reality; it *constructs* a virtual reality of its own”.¹²⁹

He finds in Vico the first instance of a philosopher who advocated an epistemological pluralism that made the distinction between knowledge of the natural world and man-made social institutions, that which Dilthey, a century later, would call the difference between *Naturwissenschaft* and *Geisteswissenschaft*:

What Descartes would completely deny and what Vico was the first to discover is that *meaning is embodied in our total affective interest in the world...* Vico further stated, “*Meaning is constructed through imaginatively entering into the minds of others.*” Vico did not share Descartes’

¹²⁵ Palmer 437.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 438.

¹²⁷ Arnold H. Modell, *Imagination and the Meaningful Brain* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2003).

¹²⁸ Modell xiii.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 13.

quest for certainty but, in a more pluralistic tradition, accepted what was only probable. Further, Vico proposed what we would now describe as an evolutionary concept of mind.... Vico proposed that in the course of cultural evolution, the human mind *evolved linguistically*, which resulted in historically different stages of consciousness and different constructions of reality.¹³⁰

Modell points out that, for Vico, the acquisition of metaphor allowed man to interpret the world in a way “in which the structure of mind was projected outwards as a metaphor derived from bodily experience. In fact, metaphor was understood not as a figure of speech, a trope, but as a vital means of understanding the world”.¹³¹ Modell attempts to advance the thesis that what may appear to be a purely subjective interpretation of experience by metaphor is actually a confirmation of universal patterns of thought that are, nevertheless, dependent on the linguistic development at a given stage. Modell sees this model as pointing towards a pluralistic epistemology and considers Vico a forerunner of it:

The really important distinction is not between the mental and the physical, mind and body, but between those real features of the world that exist independently of observers – such as force, mass and gravitational attraction – and those features that are dependent upon observers – such as money, property, marriage and government. ... I will reiterate: *when investigating a biology of meaning, we need to accept a pluralistic epistemology that combines a first- and second-person (intersubjective) perspective with the traditional third-person perspective of neuroscience.*¹³²

Modell considers essential the intersubjective perspective when thought is brought to bear on observer-dependent phenomena. If that is the case, then Vico’s insistence on rhetoric’s role in shaping knowledge gains new currency because it assumes that not only the finesse of a description of a phenomenon but also its modality, or trope,

¹³⁰ Modell 15.

¹³¹ Ibid. 15-16. To support this thought, Modell quotes from Ralph Waldo Emerson: “The world is emblematic. Parts of speech are metaphors, because the whole of nature is a metaphor of the human mind”.

¹³² 16-17.

will influence any perception of it and the meaning it imparts. The integration of a subjective perspective in the compositionality of knowledge places this model at odds with computationism, the concern of the next author.

The cognitive scientist Marcel Danesi states unequivocally that:

Vico's experientialist blueprint for the study of the mind, as he laid it out in his *New Science*, provides a viable alternative to "computationism," for I cannot but agree with the psychologist Robert Haskell (1987, 1989) in calling Vico as the first true "cognitive scientist".¹³³

What Danesi calls the *computational fallacy* is the belief that the human mind is a machine programmed to receive and produce information in biologically determined ways. He argues against this view in favour of the experientialist perspective in which 'meaning' is a derivative of individual experience. He says that a significant number, though not all, of cognitive scientists have "fallen into a metaphorical trap",¹³⁴ which is symptomatic of the entire cognitive science enterprise, when they "claim that all human activities, including emotions and social behaviour, are not only representable in the form of computer programs, but that machines themselves can be built to think, feel, and socialize".¹³⁵ The sources of this thinking are not new, he argues, citing Thomas Hobbes' definition of ratiocination as arithmetical computation, and thinking as essentially a rule-governed mechanical process that could be reproduced in machines.

Danesi says that we must never lose sight of the fundamental difference between biological and mechanical systems, at the peril of making a category mistake: "little work – computationist or non-computationist – is conducted today in cognitive science with-

¹³³ Marcel Danesi, 'Vico and Cognitive Science', in *The Imaginative Basis of Thought and Culture: Contemporary Perspectives on Giambattista Vico*, edited by Marcel Danesi and Frank Nuessel (Toronto: Canadian Scholars Press, 1994).

¹³⁴ Danesi 2.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 3.

out reference to computational theories”.¹³⁶ Against these theories, Danesi finds in Vico the traces of a model of the mind which accords a place of centrality to the imagination that “allows us literally to imagine stimuli that are no longer present for the sensory system to react to in its biologically programmed way”.¹³⁷ He describes the Vichian concepts of *fantasia*, *ingegno*, and *memoria* and traces the separation of the image (*eikon*) from the idea (*eidōs*), imagery versus language, back to Plato and on through to Descartes who “reinforced this notion by claiming that non-verbal forms of thought proceed without logic, and so cannot be studied scientifically”:¹³⁸

The key to modelling the mind in a Vichian way is to separate it into two level or layers – a *deep* and a *surface* one. The deep level is where the sense impressions that the brain converts into images are subsequently transformed into iconic signs and mnemonically usable percepts by the imagination. These are then organized into perceptual models by the *ingegno*. Percepts register our physiological and affective responses to the signals and stimuli present in the environment; perceptual models give form and meaning to these responses. ... It is at this deep level that one can talk of “imaginative universals” (Verene 1981, pp. 65-95, Mooney 1985, pp. 227-230). When these iconic transformations of our bodily experiences are connected to each other through the medium of metaphor, a surface form of cognition crystallizes. The particular characteristics of this metaphorically fabricated mental universe constitute the source of differences among persons and cultures.¹³⁹

Danesi suggests that a Vichian-type research agenda for cognitive scientists should build on the following premises: 1) that the essence of mental activity is the imagination (*fantasia*); 2) that metaphor provides the key to the nature of concept formation, and 3) that rational thought itself is a derivative of metaphor. He believes the

¹³⁶ Danesi 9.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 14.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

¹³⁹ 13.

computationalist paradigm of mind as machine is seriously inadequate, if not flawed, because it fails to explain how the mind can generate “outputs” of mental states from “inputs” from the natural world by following a step by step algorithm. Instead, he sees in Vico’s concept of the imagination the necessary component of mental activity that forms representations of external stimuli. Without this uniquely human faculty, Danese believes that we would still be able to perceive the world but not to recognise ourselves in it. These are the general outlines of his theory, and empirical research in the processes of concept formation may eventually confirm some or all of it, but imprecise descriptions of these processes such as that found above, “a surface form of cognition crystallizes”, do not effectively advance his thesis beyond substituting a naturalist metaphor in place of a mechanical or computationalist one.

IV

Summing-up

The intention of this review was stated at the beginning: *The specific purpose of this review is to individuate in these studies the areas where greater attention to or a more accurate reading of the mind would have permitted a better understanding of the New Science.* Most of the arguments raised in these studies appear in this thesis. It has probably become apparent to the reader that the subject matters do not separate neatly into single themes. For example, historical questions relate to chronological sequences as much as they do the parameters of discourse permitted by rhetoric, and these matters in turn become the subject of epistemological value and judgment. It is also clear that not every author who has made a lasting contribution to Vico scholarship figures here; rather, they have been included whose work focuses on key elements that affect an un-

derstanding of Vico's concept of mind. Undoubtedly, much more exists that could excite our interest, but the works that have been reviewed already provide an excellent starting point for further study, and on the basis of their findings these brief conclusions can be drawn.

Historical studies. Perhaps most crucial to all aspects of Vico's account of history is the question of the relationship of sacred to secular history and their interaction. There is no Christian plan for salvation, yet the role of providence is integral to the metaphysical necessity of Vico's pattern of history. This is one of the most challenging concepts in the *New Science*, for while Vico never abandons the idea of the essential sacredness of history he also offers no clues how that becomes immanent. However, these studies make it clear that any explanation of mind must take into account both sources of its ontology.

Rhetorical and philological studies. What immediately comes through in these studies is that Vico thought that the means of discourse affect not only the description of the world, as if it would exist in the same way regardless if it were talked about or not, but that on a deeper level it determines how that reality is perceived by the observer. This is not the same as saying that the physical world can not exist for itself without its articulation in human mentality, but it does mean that the theoretical concepts which explain the world are products of the interaction between the mind of man and nature. This position is most clearly at odds with a rationalist point of view which supposes that clear and distinct ideas can exist apart from their environment.

Epistemological studies. Vico's thesis that thought is somatically grounded raises many questions about the formation of abstract concepts and the extent to which ra-

tional judgments may be trusted when their connection to that source is lost. If the figures of speech determine the modes of thought, it follows that the quality of thought will be reflected in the degree to which they are developed. Because Vico never posits an essential human rationality that underlies all speech acts, it opens the way to an epistemological pluralism. And because Vico's thesis of how the imagination creates meaning is starkly different from computationalist models of mind, which are not uncommon today, his ideas can be illuminating when an alternative to that paradigm is sought.

The beast that became human

Introduction

In the *New Science* Vico says the principles of the world of civil society are to be “found within the modifications of our own human mind”.¹⁴⁰ The subject of his ‘science’ is not the natural but the civil history of the world:

For since this world of nations has certainly been made by men, it is within these modifications that its principles should have been sought. And human nature, so far as it is like that of animals, carries with it this property, that the senses are its sole way of knowing things.¹⁴¹

At the beginning and end of this history man appears in two states of barbarism, one of sense¹⁴² and the other of reflection.¹⁴³ R.G. Collingwood, one of the most perceptive readers of Vico, explained the flow of his history this way:

Vico sometimes puts his cycle in the following way: first, the guiding principle of history is brute strength; then valiant or heroic strength; then valiant justice; then brilliant originality; then constructive reflection; and lastly a kind of spendthrift and wasteful opulence which destroys what has been constructed.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴⁰ *NS* 331.

¹⁴¹ *NS* 374.

¹⁴² *NS* 41 & 393.

¹⁴³ *NS* 1106.

¹⁴⁴ R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946](Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 67.

At either end of this history, Vico's world is terrifying, but in between the mind of man constructs the institutions necessary "to preserve the human race upon this earth" and flourish.¹⁴⁵ Our first consideration will be to explain when, for Vico, humanity begins and what it is that makes us human.

The full title of Vico's *magnum opus* is *Principles of the New Science of Giambattista Vico Concerning the Common Nature of the Nations*. The nations in question are the gentile peoples which are from the seed of Adam, but who are more closely:

[M]en of the races of Ham, Japheth, and Shem, which gradually, one after the other renounced the true religion of their common father Noah which alone in the family state had been able to hold them in human society by the bonds of matrimony and hence of the families themselves.¹⁴⁶

This account of the origin of humanity, which Vico places squarely within the context of Biblical narrative, will be decisive for the overall explanation he gives of human nature and the development of the human mind, and it bears repeating that Vico's concern in the *New Science* is to furnish the principles of a civil and not a natural history, and, outside of the Biblical explanation, he never discusses the origin of man. Vico's description of early man does not match that of modern physical anthropology, although Vico's does compare culturally in some important ways, namely in the possession of language, to the idea we have today of prehistoric man.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ NS 1108.

¹⁴⁶ NS 369.

¹⁴⁷ See Michael C. Corballis, *The Lopsided Ape: Evolution of the Generative Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991). In this work, the contemporary evolutionary psychologist Michael Corballis observes that: "If human uniqueness is not to be found in consciousness or the awareness of self, I have argued nevertheless that there is a fundamental discontinuity between ourselves and other species. It has to do primarily with GAD – the vocabulary-based, generative assembling device". 311.

The nature of the beast

According to Vico, these lost races of the three sons of Noah broke off from the people of God, the Hebrews, after the Flood, and in the process of their wandering through “the great forest of the earth”¹⁴⁸ became estranged from the true religion, lost their humanity, and became beasts. In this account, it is really more fitting to speak of the beast that became human *again*, rather than human for the first time. And how does Vico’s human *re-emerge* from the beast? The simple answer to that question is, for Vico, that the beast is really man existing in a dormant state from which he is awakened by the sound of thunder that revives his *conatus*¹⁴⁹ and which directs him back to his former self.

Although Vico’s beasts had “descended to a state truly bestial and savage”,¹⁵⁰ lost the power of articulate speech, and lived without human customs, nevertheless they still possessed a *latent* humanity,¹⁵¹ as children of the Flood, in spite of their wretched state. This distinction is crucial, for if any sense is to be made of Vico’s metaphysical concept of the *corso-ricorso*,¹⁵² the course and recourse of human nations and institutions that he says gentile history necessarily follows, then he must make a necessary condition of the beast that became human an inherent potential to re-develop its humanity, even though it is passive when it is at the nadir of the historical cycle. Without the presence of something that is fundamentally human in the beasts, Vico could not explain the persistence

¹⁴⁸ NS 301.

¹⁴⁹ *The New Shorter O.E.D.*, V. 1 A-M, 465. (1993) *Conatus* [L. f. *conari*: endeavour] A purposive or seemingly purposive force or impulse; an effort, striving.

¹⁵⁰ NS 369.

¹⁵¹ Robert Miner’s view hits the mark: “They must be latently human if Vico’s view that a genetic continuity between them and ourselves is to be plausible”. *Clio*, Fall 2004, 34, no. 1-2, 170-176.

¹⁵² This concept will be treated more fully in later chapters, but for now it would suffice to know that what Vico meant by it was the pattern or process of historical transitions whereby one stage, or *corso*, of history is repeated in its *formal, though not material, aspects* after being followed by the other two stages in history. He identifies the three stages of human history as the poetic, the heroic, and the human.

of humanity through the cycles of his *ideal eternal history*, for otherwise its flow would be interrupted and his model would have had to be linear not cyclical.¹⁵³

Vico's explanation of human development starts with *Genesis*, but in other respects Vico's description of the beast is an animal that would not likely be confused for human - he has only a simian resemblance to humans, he has no language, his social structures are practically non-existent, and he feels but he does not think.¹⁵⁴

The gentile nations, then, for Vico, do not appear *ex nihilo* in history, for they are a direct issue from the Hebrew nation, though separated from it by the Flood.¹⁵⁵ This separation will allow Vico to stand clear of contradicting scriptural authority and thereby invoking the attention of the Inquisition, an ever-present threat in Naples at the time, and provide him with a sort of *tabula rasa* to construct a theory of human kind from the foundations. Free from this peril, he sets off in the *New Science* to map out a new meaning of the pursuit of knowledge, the *res cogitans*; the construction of institutions as an extension of the human body, the *res extensa*, and language acquisition, the *res linguistic* as the link which connects them. As Vico says toward the end of the *New*

¹⁵³ Cf. F.M. Barnard, 'Natural Growth and Purposive Development: Vico and Herder', *History and Theory*, 1979, 18, no.1, 16-36: "Possibly Vico was as reluctant as Montesquieu after him to view historical development primarily as the outcome of purposive human action, lest this would seriously impair the principle of historical continuity. To escape this danger, Vico might have found it necessary, religious considerations apart, to invoke a providential design. Unfortunately, Vico never made it clear whether he identified Providence with (to borrow Hegel's terminology) rational necessity or natural necessity or, conceivably, by rationalizing nature or naturalizing reason, with both; but it seems evident that Providence assumed for him the divine embodiment of continuous becoming and change". 21.

¹⁵⁴ See D. L. Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008): "The fantasy that humans used to live solitary lives, like orang-utans, has an ancient lineage in the Western tradition, going back at least as far as Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Vico made this a key feature of his depiction of life right after the Deluge. The switch to group living was a sign of civilisation because - there are shades of Guizot here - humans gave up their selfish individualism and learned to subordinate their own desires to the greater good. In so doing, they shed their biological status as animals and, for the first time, became fully human. It was civilisation that made humanity, not humanity that made civilisation". 68.

¹⁵⁵ According to the Biblical account (*Genesis* 10) all the peoples of the world descended from Noah's three sons - Shem, Ham, and Japheth. From Shem's descendents issued the Semitic peoples, and from his son Arpachshad began the genealogy of Abraham and the Hebrew nation. The descendents of Ham and Japheth became the gentile nations.

Science, as a reiteration of the key concept of man's identity, "a man is properly only mind, body, and speech, and speech stands as it were midway between mind and body".¹⁵⁶

Vico's fallen man already possesses the principle of *purposive action*, although it is not active and lies buried in the bestial mind. He does not identify human nature with the physical process of growth and decay; rather, purposive action becomes the principal means by which the beast becomes human,¹⁵⁷ it sets him on a path whose end will be to gain philosophic wisdom. Vico concludes the *New Science* with these thoughts:

But providence, through the order of civil institutions discussed in this work, makes itself palpable for us in these three feelings: the first, the marvel, the second, the veneration, hitherto felt by all the learned for the matchless wisdom of the ancients, and the third, the ardent desire with which they burned to seek and attain it. These are in fact three lights of the divine providence that aroused in them the aforesaid three beautiful and just sentiments; but these sentiments were later perverted by the conceit of scholars and by the conceit of nations – conceits we have sought throughout this work to discredit. The uncorrupted feelings are that all the learned should admire, venerate, and desire to unite themselves to the infinite wisdom of God.¹⁵⁸

The creature that became human had once possessed and then lost through disuse the mental powers that it was about to re-discover within the design of the *ideal eternal history*, for this reason, the beginning of the *New Science* can also be considered the end, because it opens with a description of the beast that is in the fallen state as a result of the *barbarism of reflection*, and who now slumbers in the wretched state of the *barbarism of the senses*. But where has the human mind gone when it reverts to a state of

¹⁵⁶ NS 1045.

¹⁵⁷ NS 1110: "In our religion, divine grace causes virtuous action for the sake of an eternal and infinite good. This good cannot fall under the senses, and it is consequently the mind that, for its sake, moves the senses to virtuous actions".

¹⁵⁸ NS 1111.

sensual barbarism? Vico tells us that this is how the beasts lived at the beginning of profane universal history:

[The] entire original human race was divided into two species: the one of giants, the other of men of normal stature; the former gentiles, the latter Hebrews. Also that this difference can have come about only as the result of the bestial education of the former and the human education of the latter. Hence that the Hebrews had a different origin from that of the gentiles.¹⁵⁹

Vico says that the primary cause for this lapse into bestiality, in addition to man's impiety, was the type of education children received – "severe, harsh, and cruel" - and that this neglect of their human nature was the cause of their reversion to social and physical animal characteristics.¹⁶⁰ This reveals something of Vico's conception of man as both a product of nature and of his own making: learning and innate processes conspire to form man. Even in this barbaric condition, something fundamentally human lay buried in the body and was waiting to be awakened to a conscious state by the sound of Jove's thunder.

The first human thinking

Vico says that our study of the human mind must begin when "these creatures began to think humanely" and that the starting point will be "some notion of God such as even the most savage, wild, and monstrous men do not lack".¹⁶¹

To discover the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years. We

¹⁵⁹ NS 172.

¹⁶⁰ NS 170, 195, 369, 371, 520, & 670.

¹⁶¹ NS 339.

had to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend only with great effort.¹⁶²

This same sentiment is expressed by Vico a little later on:

It is equally beyond our power to enter into the vast imagination of those first men, whose minds were not in the least abstract, refined, or spiritualized, because they were entirely immersed in the senses, buffeted by the passions, buried in the body. That is why we said above that we can scarcely understand, still less imagine, how those first men thought who founded gentile humanity.¹⁶³

Vico does not claim that we can understand the mind of primitive man in its bestial state, but he does establish the point at which we can begin to recognize our humanity in it. This *terminus post quem* of uniquely human thinking is the moment that the beasts first heard in a clap of thunder the voice of an angry god. This event, which Vico describes in several places in the *New Science*, is the all-in-one starting point of humanity as we know it: self-consciousness, language, and the first institution, which he says is divination, all begin here. At this decisive moment, the beasts externalize their fear of nature and one another and transfer it to a god of their imagination whose angry nature they must collectively placate. The beasts' odyssey of wandering in the "great forest of the earth" is coming to an end:¹⁶⁴

Moral virtue began, as it must, from conatus. For the giants, enchained under the mountains by the frightful religion of the thunderbolts, learned to check their bestial habit of wandering wild through the great forest of the earth, and acquired the contrary custom of remaining hid-

¹⁶² *NS* 338.

¹⁶³ *NS* 378.

¹⁶⁴ In a psychoanalytical reading, Vico's "great forest of the earth" could also be understood metaphorically as the deep unconscious where men have lost their way but through which they must pass before they can enjoy the clear vision of reason afforded by the vast river plains.

den and settled in their fields. Hence they later became the founders of the nations and the lords of the first commonwealths.¹⁶⁵

This situation may appear paradoxical, if viewed from the perspective of the *ideal eternal history*, for while the beast slowly becomes alienated from the natural environment and its *animal* nature in the process of founding institutions, it is also actually beginning a return to its lost *human* nature. This decisive event represents for Vico's humanity a major transition from living in an undifferentiated state of sense to the recognition that it inhabits a separate ontological reality that stands outside the world of nature.¹⁶⁶ After this moment, the exertions of its mind will gain value by 'making sense' in the construction of social reality, and where the mind is absent becomes identified with beastliness and the natural world:¹⁶⁷

The giants were by nature of enormous build... In our view, these causes [of their stature] are to be traced to the bestial education of their children.¹⁶⁸

Vico's beasts may be the descendents of fallen man but they are culturally feral animals due to the lack of human institutions, education in particular, and that is the cause of their physical monstrosity. When Vico speaks of man's development it is not of the epigenesis of a species, but rather of the restoration of a fallen race:

¹⁶⁵ NS 504.

¹⁶⁶ Vico's account of this transition is fundamentally similar to the process that some contemporary cognitive scientists explain. See Gerald M. Edelman and Giulio Tononi, *A Universe of Consciousness: How Matter Becomes Imagination* (New York: Basic Books, 2000): "Higher-order consciousness (which flourishes in humans and presupposes the coexistence of primary consciousness) is accompanied by a sense of self and the ability in the waking state explicitly to construct past and future scenes. It requires, at a minimum, a semantic capability and, in its most developed form, a linguistic capability". 102.

¹⁶⁷ Vico has two terms for the creatures of this state of humanity – beasts (*bestie*) and giants (*giganti*). Although his employment of the terms is not always systematic, in general he refers to earlier man as beasts and the later as giants.

¹⁶⁸ NS 170.

[For] a long period of time the impious races of the three children of Noah, having lapsed into a state of bestiality, went wandering like wild beasts until they were scattered and dispersed through the great forest of the earth, and that with their bestial education giants had sprung up and existed among them at the time when the heavens thundered for the first time after the flood.¹⁶⁹

Vico tells us that the first human institution is divination, for all society looks to the oracle as the interpreter of divine will. The second human institution is marriage, for without it there are no lasting social bonds, upon which other institutions are based:

Mothers abandoned their children, who in time must have come to grow up without ever hearing a human voice, much less learning any human custom, and thus descended to a state truly bestial and savage. Mothers, like beasts, must merely have nursed their babies, let them wallow in their own filth, whose nitrous salts richly fertilized the fields, and who had to exert themselves to penetrate the great forest, grown extremely dense from the flood, would flex and contract their muscles in these exertions, and thus absorb nitrous salts into their bodies in greater abundance. They would be quite without fear of gods, fathers, and teachers which chills and benumbs even the most exuberant in childhood. They must therefore have grown robust, vigorous, excessively big in brawn and bone, to the point of becoming giants.¹⁷⁰

We can look, Janus like, at the state of the beast: its ancestors abandoned their religion, no longer practiced the institution of marriage, and were intensely self-absorbed in what Vico calls the *barbarism of reflection*. Education was practically non-existent, and what of it that did exist was violent and cruel. But the Hebrews, on the contrary:

[On] account of their cleanly upbringing and their fear of God and of their fathers, continued to be of the proper stature in which God had created Adam and Noah had procreated his

¹⁶⁹ NS 195.

¹⁷⁰ NS 369.

three sons; and it was perhaps in abomination of giantism that the Hebrews had so many ceremonial laws pertaining to bodily cleanliness.¹⁷¹

How will the gentile beast begin to regain its humanity after having fallen so low from its Hebrew origins? Certainly there was no conscious awareness of embarking on a new course, for as Vico tells us their conscious thought began with:

[A] metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination.¹⁷²

Vico places fear, and not wonder which he says is second,¹⁷³ as the first emotion that stirred the mind to self-consciousness. He seems to have thought that this re-awakening to humanity required something violent, the physiological equivalent of a Big Bang, to stir the animal from its slumbers, and wonder, although it is an emotion that can arrest the senses, requires at least some degree of reflection, which the beast did not yet possess. At this time, man stands on the opposite end of the spectrum from abstract reason, and this observation becomes one of the principles of the *New Science* – “Imagination is more robust in proportion as reasoning power is weak”.¹⁷⁴

It was an act of God, the Flood, that initially provoked their fall, and it will be another act of God, in this case a violent clap of thunder and flashing lightning, from which their humanity will re-emerge:

[A] few giants, who must have been the most robust, and who were dispersed through the forests on the mountain heights where the strongest beasts have their dens, were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know, and raised their eyes and be-

¹⁷¹ NS 371.

¹⁷² NS 375.

¹⁷³ NS 377

¹⁷⁴ NS 185.

came aware of the sky. And because in such a case the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own nature to the effect, and because in that state their nature was that of men all robust strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes, who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder. And thus they began to exercise that natural curiosity which, opening the mind of man, gives birth to wonder.¹⁷⁵

This is the moment, the clap of thunder, when the first human thought occurred and its reference in several places throughout the *New Science* points out Vico's position that all human knowledge, from the beginning of thought to an age of reason, is essentially rooted in the imagination. It is also at this moment in which true human effort occurs: Vico calls this *conatus*.

The role of conatus in human development

The concept of *conatus*, whose origins extend back to the Greeks and Romans, was discussed by many important seventeenth-century philosophers, including Descartes, Spinoza, Leibniz, and Hobbes. There has never been universal agreement on its meaning as it applies to living things or to physical processes. Nevertheless, *conatus* for Vico is an innate force in living things that preserves life and pushes them to fulfil their potential. In the case of human beings, it is for Vico quite literally the power that breaks the shackles of beastliness that hold man down to the earth. *Conatus* is mentioned several times in the *New Science*, but it is in his earlier work, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians (De Antiquissima Italarum Sapientia)*,¹⁷⁶ Vico's first expression of his theory of knowledge and metaphysics, that the elusive concept receives its fullest treatment. I

¹⁷⁵ NS 377.

¹⁷⁶ Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians* [1710] (after *Wisdom*) (translated by L.M. Palmer) (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

cannot do justice here to the complexity of this term, nevertheless I think it would be ill-advised to proceed without taking a closer look at it because much of what Vico says about human nature depends on what he means by it. Here are several explanations of *conatus* found in the *De Antiquissima*:

Nature is motion. The indefinite power to move underlying this motion is conatus. The infinite, and in itself motionless, mind that excites this power is God. The works of nature are brought into being by conatus and brought to perfection by motion. In sum, the genesis of things presupposes motion, motion presupposes conatus, and conatus presupposes God.¹⁷⁷

In this sense, *conatus* can be understood as the vehicle that 'drives' God's will in the world; it is an incorporeal power that acts on a material reality. For Vico, there is a natural teleology intrinsic to man that operates on his being as a principle of self-organization; nevertheless, the source of that force is external to him. This complex relationship will have need of harmonization if Vico's beast is to have free-will and its development not simply be a product of material causality. And Vico's answer to that will be that *the modifications of the mind* allow that freedom, while at the same time its development will closely parallel the pattern of the *ideal eternal history*. *Conatus*, then, is the first of the innate principles that will constitute the foundation of mind in man:

We measure the extended, but the infinite defies measure. Indeed, it is entirely right for the power of extension to be contained in God "eminently," as our theologians say. Therefore, just as conatus is the power of motion, and in God as author of conatus, it is rest, so too primary matter is the power of extension, which in God as the founder of matter is the purest mind. There is, therefore, a substance in metaphysics which is the power of the indefinite division of extension.¹⁷⁸

¹⁷⁷ *Wisdom* 79.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.* 72-73.

Vico's use of the metaphysical concept of *conatus* is intended to provide a solution to the problem of the connectivity of God to the world. He hoped that it could explain the way in which human development was linked to providential design, but still retain the power of human beings to configure their own destiny. What Vico adds to the purely physical concept of *conatus* as 'effort' or 'striving', which *could* be interpreted as a force that compromises human freedom because it seems to determine action and restrict choice, is another meaning closer to 'inclination' and 'tendency' that is internally driven, and which I think Vico believed actually served to *expand* its range of activity by controlling the bestial nature that had overtaken man and from which he would re-emerge. Vico's beasts are from this point on not just mindlessly surviving in nature, but discover a new identity in nature through an association of their own physical nature and that of the powers in nature. At this point, when the first thinking occurs, Vico introduces his reader to the first noble giants, who represent a transitional state between the beasts and humans:

But these first men, who later became the princes of the gentile nations, must have done their thinking under the strong impulsion of violent passions, as beasts do. We must therefore proceed from a vulgar metaphysics... and seek by its aid that frightful thought of some divinity which imposed form and measure on the bestial passions of these lost men and thus transformed them into human passions. From this thought must have sprung the *conatus* proper to the human will, to hold in check the motions impressed on the mind by the body, so as either to quiet them altogether, as becomes the wise man, or at least to direct them to better use, as becomes the civil man. This control over the motion of their bodies is certainly an effect of the freedom of human choice, and thus of free will, which is the home and seat of all the virtues, and among the others of justice.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁹ NS 340.

Vico says that *conatus* is a kind of regulatory power that is a gift to humans from heaven. It is a type of unself-conscious awareness that will allow the beast, who transitions into a giant by possessing it, to discriminate between options available to it. Because this faculty involves choice, it entails a type of proto-morality:

[T]he metaphysics of the poet giants, who had warred against heaven in their atheism, vanquished them with the terror of Jove, whom they feared as the wielder of the thunderbolt. And it humbled not only their bodies but their minds as well, by creating in them this frightful idea of Jove. (The idea was of course not shaped by reasoning, for they were not yet capable of that, but by the senses, which, however false in the matter, were true enough in their form – which was the logic conformable to such natures as theirs.) This idea, by making them god-fearing, was the source of their poetic morality.¹⁸⁰

In this way *conatus* bestows a moral direction to human action that was previously *pointless*; henceforth, in order to avoid the wrath of Jove, humans will choose an alternative to beastliness. Implied in this concept is the notion that intentionality is present in some shape or form.

The third aspect of *conatus* is that it endows the giants with an aesthetic sense. Vico says that man first learned to appreciate the beauty of the human form and only later, through extension of recognition of human-like beauty in “all sensible forms”, do the “physicists”, the Pre-Socratic philosophers, acquire an appreciation of beauty in nature. *Conatus* leads the beast towards an appreciation of human beauty, which becomes personified first in Apollo and later Venus, which in their geometric symmetry and noble aspect become associated with the virtues of civil light and beauty. In other words, the aesthetic sense is founded on the human form and in so far as nature is beautiful it is a reflection of human attributes and dimension:

¹⁸⁰ NS 502.

At length the sky broke forth in thunder, and Jove thus gave a beginning to the world of men by arousing in them the conatus which is proper to the liberty of the mind, just as from motion, which is proper to bodies as necessary agents, he began the world of nature. For what seems to be conatus in bodies is but insensible motion, as we said above in the Method. From this conatus came the civil light of which Apollo is the character, by which light was discerned the civil beauty with which the heroes were beautiful. And Venus was the character of this civil beauty, which the physicists later took for the beauty of nature, and even for the whole of formed nature, as being beautifully adorned with all sensible forms.¹⁸¹

Conclusion

In Vico, *conatus* functions as a sort of ‘stem cell’ of social evolution that provides a cognitive, moral, and aesthetic foundation for the species. It is not a biological or physical entity, but it creates the conditions necessary for man’s distinctive identity in nature. Nature for man, in Vico, is inhospitable and alien to his true nature: it is a world that belongs to Hobbes, not Rousseau. In this world, the human mind in the state of barbarism does not entirely vanish, but it ceases to be manifested because the social institutions necessary for it to be revealed have disappeared. Only through the use of language and the construction of social institutions will the beast be restored to his true civilised identity, and the foundational thought for that to occur is Jove.

Where does the belief in Jove, a supreme being, come from? How does the sound of thunder become the thought of a god? When man “made” Jove, Vico means to say, he did not create him in order to have a god to believe in. The thought of Jove must have appeared spontaneously from within him. The myth of Jove, the first of man’s myths for Vico, was not *knowingly* created by the beast in order to have something to believe in, for they could not knowingly have believed in an imaginary creation if they did not think

¹⁸¹ NS 689.

it was real. For poetic man the fables of his imagination are indistinguishable from the natural forces they are meant to mimic; it is his very lack of self-conscious reflection that makes these metaphorical constructions believable for him.¹⁸² But the beasts must have *felt* them to be true, and for them their beliefs were most likely self-evidently true. They still had no way to distinguish between their feelings and their beliefs. This is why when Vico speaks of Jove and the mind of the beast he means to say that the thought of it was true and only later, upon reflection, was the *belief* in Jove made true. The will to believe in Jove is a result of the interaction between human *conatus*, in this case the volitional faculty of man's ontology for Vico, and an incipient faculty of metaphor-making whereby the strongest of the beasts find a direct correspondence between their own power and that of nature.¹⁸³ And because they cannot conceive of 'nature' in the abstract they naturally think of that power in terms of themselves. Thus, Vico meant that the beast made the first transition to mindedness without *knowing* it: it was a *felt* response that later became identified with thought. And the idea of the god, likewise, is built up over time by the memory of previous terrifying thunderstorms that are stored in the collective un-

¹⁸² See Christopher Drew Armstrong, 'Myth and the New Science: Vico, Tiepolo, and the Language of the *Optimates*'. *Art Bulletin*, 87, 2005: "The ordering of sound and images into coherent meaning was not driven by a self-conscious aesthetic that stood apart from its utility, and poetic rhetorical devices served first and foremost as vehicles of communication, not of individual self-expression. ... Ancient myth and poetry were characterized by the use of vivid imagery and a feeble grasp of reasoning similar to the conceptions of children. Poetic devices such as onomatopoeia, personification, and repetition revealed a capacity to imitate and an inability to generalize or to form abstractions. The use of metered constructions offered a means to discipline the unformed organs of speech. Rather than the product of artifice or refinement, poetry constituted the earliest attempt to articulate human experience". 650.

¹⁸³ See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* [1953] (New York: Dover Publications, 1982): "The [mythical] paradigm traces its origin from the same need which is also at the root of the animal simile, our need for establishing our place in the world order by means of comparisons, in order to arrive at a tolerable degree of certainty and stability. To-day we still experience the same need, but we prefer to be guided by the facts of experience, or by historical parallels, rather than by legends".

consciousness. Thus, there is no original thought or intention to create or conceive of Jove: Jove *is* the sound of many thunders that shake and wake up the beast decisively.¹⁸⁴

What so far is not explained by this account of the birth of human cognition is how representational content develops. Vico will need to explain how the beast was able to differentiate itself from the extended projection of itself in nature in order for its thoughts to be ‘about something’ other than itself. In the next chapter I will focus on how Vico attempts to answer that by his exposition of the origin of language.

¹⁸⁴ See Donald Philip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): “For the poetic mind poetic characters are not colourful or rhetorical embellishments of genera abstracted from empirical particulars; thus the particulars are not thought of *analogically*, as being *like*, the ideal portraits of the generic individual of the fable. ... Vico’s conception of imaginative universals is not based on a nominalism in which a particular is raised to the level of a universal type and taken to stand for the nature of the class out of which it arises. Instead the reverse is true; particulars are directly conceived as universals”. 307.

The giant that opened the mind of man

Introduction

In Vico's account of man he says that a race of giants followed the beasts, and that these creatures represented an advance toward rational man. He says that fear, which held man in thrall, had to be the cause of this advance to mental awakening:

Of such [frightened] natures must have been the first founders of gentile humanity when at last the sky fearfully rolled with thunder and flashed with lightning, as could not but follow from the bursting upon the air for the first time of an impression so violent... Thereupon a few giants, who must have been the most robust, and who were dispersed through the forests on the mountain heights where the strongest beasts have their dens, were frightened and astonished by the great effect whose cause they did not know, and raised their eyes and became aware of the sky. And because in such a state the nature of the human mind leads it to attribute its own nature to the effect, and because in that state their nature was that of men all robust bodily strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body, which in that aspect they called Jove, the first god of the so-called greater gentes, who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder. And thus they began to exercise that natural curiosity which is the daughter of ignorance and the mother of knowledge, and which, opening the mind of man, gives birth to wonder.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁵ NS 377.

Did Vico intend this to be taken as allegory or fact, and what does he base his claims on? Is he claiming to know what our distant ancestors actually thought or what he thinks they were capable of thinking? In framing his iconography of early man, Vico was not the first to conceive of man in that brutish state, Lucretius had done that long before in *De rerum natura*, and it is unlikely that the not uncommon image of the *Homo sylvestris*, the 'wild man of the woods', would have been unknown to him.¹⁸⁶ But in Vico's lifetime mathematical explanations of the universe, largely shaped by Newton's *Principles*, were making it increasingly difficult to reconcile the new science with a traditional world-picture and a religious teleology. Vico, however, hoped that science could validate what he thought was a universal instinct or intuition in man of a divine plan in nature by the evidence of the infinite variety and explanatory power of human language, which he considered a divine attribute.¹⁸⁷ Vico's stated intention was that he hoped to demonstrate in his philosophy that human development followed certain laws that could be understood scientifically. He sought to confirm this intuition by applying his knowledge of philology to the question of man's origins.

¹⁸⁶ One such example worth speculation is whether Vico was influenced by the Neapolitan artist Giambattista della Porta, who lived a hundred years before him but whose works were well known even in Vico's day. In the works of della Porta, as elsewhere in Western art, the corrupt moral status of man is reflected in his physical condition; moral degeneration is associated with beastliness. Martin Kemp writes in his *The Human Animal in Western Art and Science* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007): "In 1586, the polymath Giambattista della Porta published his *On Human Physiognomy*, with plentiful woodcut illustrations and a short, largely formulaic text. The Neapolitan author had emerged precociously in his early twenties with the first edition of *Natural Magic* (1558) an eclectic compilation of science and secrets that retained its popularity even after the advent of more systematic analysis of natural phenomena in the next century. One of the legendary facts that he retails in *Natural Magic*, under the heading of "Sundry Copulations," is mating of humans with diverse beasts". 45.

¹⁸⁷ See Deborah Kelemen, 'Beliefs about purpose: on the origins of teleological thought', in *The Descent of Mind: Psychological Perspectives on Hominid Evolution*, eds. Michael C. Corballis and Stephen E.G. Lea (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), for a good summary of recent research on this topic: "One of the best indicators that people are compelled to reason in teleological terms is provided by the ubiquitous phenomenon of religion. Adults' propensity to view objects and events as purposefully caused by intentional agents or gods is so prevalent that some have gone so far as to equate it to our susceptibility to disease (Dawkins 1993)... Research indicates that both children and adults make the fundamental assumption that objects exist for a purpose". 278-294.

Imagination as a research tool

In stark contrast to Descartes, who believed that we could know only our own minds with certainty, Vico believed that we could understand other minds by the imagination; by this he meant the creative, but informed, reconstruction of the past through the study of philological and institutional artefacts. It is a meticulous and pain-staking process, Vico tells us, and is not the same thing as wild fantasizing or mystical revelation.¹⁸⁸ Long before Wilhelm Dilthey suggested in his theory of *Verstehen* that we can re-enact historical thinking, Vico looked on the past not as an inscrutable rune but as a portal to understanding our own nature. In perhaps the most-quoted passage from the *New Science*, Vico explains how he believed this was possible:

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own mind. Whoever reflects on this cannot but marvel that the philosophers should have bent all their energies to the study of the world of nature, which, since God made it, He alone knows; and that they should have neglected the study of the world of nations, or civil world, which, since men had made it, men could come to know.¹⁸⁹

Vico believed he was immune from committing what later William James would call “the psychologists’ fallacy”¹⁹⁰ because he thought that the psychological experiences

¹⁸⁸ See Isaiah Berlin, ‘Vico’s Concept of Knowledge’, in *Giambattista Vico: An International Symposium*, eds. G. Tagliacozzo & H.V. White (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1969). “The identification of this sense of “knowing,” which is neither deductive nor inductive (nor hypothetico-deductive), neither founded on the direct perception of the external world nor a fantasy which lays no claim to truth or coherence, is Vico’s achievement”. 376.

¹⁸⁹ *NS* 331.

¹⁹⁰ William James, *The Principles of Psychology* [1890] (New York: Dover Publications, 1950). James wrote: “The great snare of the psychologist is the confusion of his own standpoint with that of the mental fact about which he is making his report. I shall hereafter call this the ‘psychologist’s fallacy’ par excellence”.

of previous generations have empirical continuity that reach into our own lives in language and society, and that, as inheritors of this evolution, we can access them to understand the various stages of consciousness in which they occurred.¹⁹¹ But the problem with this approach to historical reconstruction is that while it may have a certain inductive integrity when based on the span of available knowledge, it has greater difficulty in achieving deductive validity when the range of knowledge is less than general.¹⁹²

Vico says the giants were the first to possess speech and think humanly. This is the moment when a conceptual threshold is passed and distinctly human thinking begins, when man, through vocal language, becomes a culture-dependent species, as distinct from an instinct-directed animal. From this point on, Vico says that we can begin to probe the mind of early man because historical understanding is based on language, and from the time that mankind possessed its own thinking has been continuous with it. In Vico's reconstruction of early man, the phenomenon of early thinking is the product of both biological and cultural forces: it is neither strictly a natural faculty, nor is it solely a successful cultural adaptation to the environment. His account of human mind focuses essentially on linguistic evolution, and it is in the acquisition and development of lan-

196. This bias leads to a lack of objectivity when the observer assumes that his knowledge and experience of phenomena are identical or very similar to that of the observed.

¹⁹¹ Berlin, *Concept*: "...the central principle which is Vico's ultimate claim to immortality: the principle according to which man can understand himself because, and in the process, of understanding his past – because he is able to reconstruct imaginatively (in Aristotle's phrase) what he did and what he suffered, his hopes, wishes, fears, efforts, his acts, and his works, both his own and those of his fellows". 373.

¹⁹² A similar fallacy is known as the 'historian's fallacy'. This is the mistake of assuming that thinkers in the past shared the same perspectives and arrived at the same conclusions based on similar premises. See David Hackett Fischer, *Historians' Fallacies: Toward a Logic of Historical Thought* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1970).

guage where Vico finds the sources of human consciousness. The poetic principle, Vico's "master key", is the imaginative power that forms concepts from sense-data.¹⁹³

The beast begins to speak

In Vico's history, between one and two hundred years after the Flood,¹⁹⁴ there appeared a discernible gap between some of the stronger, more robust beasts, who Vico calls 'giants' (*giganti*), and the less endowed 'brutes' (*grossi bestioni*). The giants began to associate thunder and lightning with a supreme being, a god who was in everything. They thought they were being spoken to by signs, just as they had, until now, communicated to one another through sign and body language.¹⁹⁵

The first men, who spoke by signs, naturally believed that lightning bolts and thunder-claps were signs made to them by Jove; whence from *nuo*, to make a sign, came *numen*, the divine will, by an idea more than sublime and worthy to express the divine majesty. They believed that Jove commanded by signs, that such signs were real words, and that nature was the language of Jove. The science of this language the gentiles universally believed to be divination, which by the Greeks was called theology, meaning the science of the language of the gods.¹⁹⁶

The first men began to associate the powers of nature with an omnipresent being that commanded the world. We may view this as a move forward in consciousness in which natural phenomena become interpreted as an abstract entity, but that would not be what Vico meant. When Vico says that the will of Jove was expressed everywhere in

¹⁹³ NS 34.

¹⁹⁴ NS 373.

¹⁹⁵ The French philosopher of mind the Abbé Étienne Bonnot de Condillac (1715-1780), in his account of the origin of language in his *Essay on the Origin of Human Knowledge (Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines, 1746)*, presents an account of the sequence of language acquisition similar to Vico's: both thinkers held that before man used spoken language he communicated through signs and gestures. A hundred years later, Charles Darwin wrote in *The Descent of Man and selection in relation to sex* (London: William Clowes, 1871): "I cannot doubt that language owes its origins to the imitation and modifications of various natural sounds, and man's own distinctive cries, aided by signs and gestures".

¹⁹⁶ NS 379 & 401.

signs in nature, he meant that the distinction between sign and symbol was non-existent: Jove was thunder and the thunder was Jove. Hence, Vico reminds us, the expression *Jovis omnia plena* came into being:

In this fashion the first theological poets created the first divine fable, the greatest they ever created: that of Jove, king and father of men and gods, in the act of hurling the lightning bolt; an image so popular, disturbing, and instructive that its creators themselves believed in it, and feared, revered, and worshiped it in frightful religions. And by that trait of the human mind noticed by Tacitus whatever these men saw, imagined, or even made or did themselves they believed to be Jove; and to all of the universe that came within their scope, and to all its parts, they gave the being of animate substance. This is the civil history of the expression "All things are full of Jove" (*Jovis omnia plena*).¹⁹⁷

How does Vico make the case that *Jove* is the first *thought* if it is an immediate reaction to an event, the thunder, and not a proper statement, with a subject and verb, that is generally considered to be the minimum level of grammatical complexity necessary for a thought? How do they advance to a level of language that has syntax and generative capability? As a response to the fear generated by the thunder, Vico says that with a single utterance (*Jove*) thinking began. Although this may describe how the beasts reacted to this event, it does not explain how from that response further meaning could be derived.

Vico's subject is *fallen* man, not the evolutionary hominoid of anthropology. This creature already possesses a mind (although it has been severely reduced from its former state) that is re-awakened by thunder. The importance of this account is twofold. One is that Vico seems to be saying that understanding exists in some form prior to rationality, and two, that the acquisition of mental powers is connected to somatic proc-

¹⁹⁷ NS 379.

esses. The mind of the beast is *revived* through the emotions, not *recollected* by geometric reasoning, as in the case of the slave-boy in Plato's *Meno*.¹⁹⁸ This account will have greater resonance when compared to rationalist versions of knowledge, because in the case of Vico his interpretation will lead to an appreciation of truth as socially constructed, while the Platonic meaning of truth is universal and social relevance plays no, or little, part in epistemic meaning. This first mind is the embryo of Vico's poetic mind, the mind that begins creating the concepts upon which the first three institutions of religion, marriage, and burial will be established, and each one of these institutions has a corresponding part that is related to physical aspects in human nature. In the case of religion, it is related to the drive to externalize fear; marriage is concerned with the protection of progeny; and burial is an attempt to sanitize the living space.

At either end of history in the *New Science* mankind is barely recognizable as such. At the beginning he is an unreasoning beast, and at the end, before his regression in the cycle of the *ideal eternal history*, he is a hyper-rational 'humanoid', devoid of emotional understanding. In the giants, we can begin to recognise human traits, such as vocal language as a developed system of sounds having lexical and phonological syntax. They are distinct from Vico's earlier beasts that possess consciousness, and who have gestural language, but not thought and articulate speech.¹⁹⁹ Furthermore, the giants had self-awareness because they possessed language. And Vico makes a further distinction between the giants:

¹⁹⁸ See Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006): "Vico's account of the emergence of modern reason, indeed his whole conception of human attitudes and culture moving in stages that became progressively more rational, here, closely parallels Fontenelle's conception of the evolution of *l'esprit humain* from primitive imaginings, and is anchored in Spinoza's idea that ideas are an articulation of feeling and sense perception and, no matter how confused and inaccurate, invariably correspond to actual real things". 527

¹⁹⁹ The distinguishing feature of human language, according to Chomsky, is that it allows us to generate a potentially unlimited number of messages, and not simply responses to immediate stimuli.

Of the giants there were in turn two kinds: the first, the sons of Earth, or nobles, from whom, as being giants in the full sense of the term, the age of giants took its name, as we have said (and it is these whom sacred history defines as “strong, famous and powerful men of the age”); the second, less properly so called, those other giants who were subjugated [by the former].²⁰⁰

The humanization of the noble giants

As Vico identifies them, these “sons of the Earth” were endowed with greater curiosity of mind and refinement of body than their less-developed relatives, who they will come to dominate. The noble giants become the founders of the first gentile families, and their political legitimacy is tied to their claim to belong to the land they live on:

Such giants were scattered over the earth after the flood. We have seen them in the fabulous history of the Greeks, and the Latin philologists, without being aware of it, have told us of their existence in the ancient history of Italy, where they say that the most ancient peoples of Italy, the so-called aborigines, claimed to be *autochthones*, which is as much as to say sons of Earth, which among the Greeks and Latins meant nobles. And in the fables the Greeks quite properly called the sons of earth giants, and the Earth mother of giants.²⁰¹

The human form of body and soul re-emerge from the bodies of the giants through education, which Vico says is based on a “fear of gods, fathers, and teachers”.²⁰²

For heroic education began to bring forth in a certain way the form of the human soul which had been completely submerged in the huge bodies of the giants, and began likewise to bring forth the form of the human body itself in its just dimensions from the disproportionate giant bodies.²⁰³

²⁰⁰ NS 372.

²⁰¹ NS 370 & 531.

²⁰² NS 369.

²⁰³ NS 520.

Vico wants to draw our attention to his belief that the process of humanization involves moral,²⁰⁴ mental, and physical development; it is a holistic vision of man in which the absence of one element would undo the rest:

The metaphysics of the philosophers, by means of the idea of God, fulfils its first task that of clarifying the human mind, which needs logic so that with clear and distinct ideas it may shape its reasonings, and descend therewith to cleanse the heart of man with morality. Just so the metaphysics of the poet giants, who had warred against heaven in their atheism, vanquished them with the terror of Jove, whom they feared as the wielder of the thunderbolt. And it humbled not only their bodies but their minds as well, by creating in them this frightful idea of Jove.²⁰⁵

This account of the awakening of the gentile mind makes God, or the idea of God, and man causally and teleologically connected from the beginning of history. Of course, this is also true of God's relationship to the Hebrews, but Vico is careful to point out that the essential characteristics of those connections are different, and it is in this way he can offer a new interpretation of human development that does not offend canonical tradition because the wanderings of "the races of Ham, Japheth, and Shem" do not figure into the Biblical narrative:²⁰⁶

The Hebrews thought God to be an infinite Mind beholding all times in one point of eternity, whence God, either Himself or through the angels that are minds or through the prophets to whose minds God spoke, gave notice of what was in store for His people. The gentiles fancied bodies to be gods, that by sensible signs they might give notice of what was in store for the peoples... After an interval of two centuries (as fabulous history relates), Heaven reigned on earth and bestowed many and great blessings on mankind, and, by uniformity of ideas among orientals, Egyp-

²⁰⁴ NS 504: "Moral virtue began, as it must from conatus. For the giants, enchained under the mountains by the frightful religion of the thunderbolts, learned to check their bestial habit of wandering wild through the great forest of the earth, and acquired the contrary custom of remaining hidden and settled in their fields".

²⁰⁵ NS 502.

²⁰⁶ NS 369.

tians, Greeks, Latins and other gentile nations, there arose equally the religions of as many Joves. For at the end of this period of time after the flood, heaven must have thundered and lightened, and from the thunder and lightning of its Jove each nation began to take auspices.²⁰⁷

The nature of the gentile connection is established through a *physical* awakening, whereas the connection to the Hebrews is a *metaphysical* revelation that is apprehended through reason. In this way, Vico is suggesting that thought has a *somatic* foundation, and that no matter how abstract thinking may become, its base remains in the emotions, and the emotional content of language affects perception and the expression of thought. Vico wants to emphasize how pivotal the effect of thunder and lightning were on the imaginations of men in order to illustrate the sequence of the development of emotions, which initially serve as survival mechanisms, and for this reason he places fear before wonder because the purpose it serves is more critical to protecting life.²⁰⁸ Vico attributes human nature to the influence of both adapted behaviour (education) and innate biases (emotions). Like Plato's metaphor of the tripartite soul in the *Phaedrus*,²⁰⁹ in which the charioteer must control the irrational elements of his nature in order to go forward, Vico's model of mind admits the opposite components of man's nature and tries to guide them together with reason.

How is this vision of early man in the *New Science* to be understood? First, there seem to be two extreme interpretations. In one reading, Vico's beasts are his imaginary

²⁰⁷ NS 9.

²⁰⁸ NS 389 & 191. In these paragraphs Vico treats the creation of gods from fear. In cognitive science, the negativity bias explains why fear and not wonder was the primary motivation in the construction of man's social development. It says that of the five primary emotions, four are negative and one, happiness, is positive. See Paul Rozin, 'About 17 (+/-2) Potential Principles about Links between the Innate Mind and Culture: Preadaptation, Predispositions, Preferences, Pathways, and Domains', in *The Innate Mind Volume 2: Culture and Cognition*, eds. Peter Carruthers, Stephen Laurence, Stephen Stich (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 45.

²⁰⁹ Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. Christopher Rowe, (London: Penguin Books, 2005).

continuation of the biblical narrative of *Genesis* that he creates to fill the void left by that account of how errant mankind, the gentiles, comes back to God's Word (*Jove*). In this way, biblical sources are reconciled with scientific knowledge, and the life of the on-going metaphor of sacred history is prolonged into the eighteenth century by finding empirical evidence for its foundational claims. In another reading, Vico is challenging the veracity of the Biblical account and casting the question of man's origins in a purely anthropological dimension. According to this interpretation, his giants are a product of fact, in so far as philological evidence is used to support his claims, and of his imagination, if by that is meant reasonable conjectures of the reconstruction of the past.²¹⁰ Is there any reason not to choose between either of these interpretations? Perhaps there is.

The meaning of Vico's account of human origins can better be understood scientifically *and* metaphorically. His intention was not to revive historical chimeras of the past, whether Biblical or from the classical world, in order to hold them up as an anti-modern challenge to the science of his own age. Nor was he purposing to eviscerate historical mythologies of their truth value in favour of scientific reasoning. Rather, Vico's reconstruction of the mind of early man was conducted with the belief that the influence of mythological reality persists in the structures of the modern psyche, and thus not only can they not be ignored or dismissed by science, but they have to be positively recognized as essential to scientific reasoning. Within the boundaries of this perspective, it is in some sense infertile to ask whether he believed in *Genesis* or the scientific method, if by that is meant the accumulation of empirical evidence to support a hypothesis. Vico's

²¹⁰ Today, we would say that his methodology incorporated *nomothetic* science, in so far as he was looking for general laws of human development, and *ideographic* science when he seeking confirmation of those laws in particular events. See Aviezer Tucker, *Our Knowledge of the Past* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 241, for a discussion of nomothetic and ideographic science.

achievement was to pursue a method of inquiry that included both subjective and objective evidence, and in the case of the former verification was often no more than a matter of common belief, if that held explanatory power. Undoubtedly, from the vantage point of today, some of Vico's arguments are indefensible, but it would be wrong to conclude from this that his method was not essentially sound.

In his account of man's acquisition of language, Vico anticipated some of the findings of contemporary research. He believed that spoken language represented the decisive point of discontinuity between humans and other animals, the moment when true humanity began. He recognized that even though the environment was crucial in development, it alone was not sufficient to account for the level of complexity displayed in human thinking. Vico very strongly emphasises the important contribution of emotions to thought, beginning with his account of thunder to awaken or instil in mankind the idea of an all-powerful divinity, and whose name is onomatopoeically related to the sound it is associated with.²¹¹ Nevertheless, Vico also implies, by holding on to the post-diluvium account of mankind, that there remains a vestige, once almost extinguished, of his former rationality. This once-considerable power of reason, which is whole in pre-diluvium times and again in the human age, is present in a much diminished form in the other stages of human history. It would appear that Vico was trying to strike a balance between a rationalist conception of cognition, in which *a priori* ideas lead to further ideas, and a view that environmental factors are primarily responsible for responses to and

²¹¹ See Bruce H. Weber, 'Emergence of Mind and the Baldwin Effect', in *Evolution and Learning: The Baldwin Effect Reconsidered*, eds. Bruce H. Weber and David J. Depew (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003): "That behaviour and even emotions could have an influence on natural selection was explored by Darwin. 'Charles Darwin,' says Edelman, 'was the first to propose that natural selection alters behavior and vice versa' (Edelman, G.M. (1987. *Neural Darwinism: The Theory of Neuronal Group Selection* (New York: Basic Books), 10. It is the "vice versa" that now needs to be included in any account of the evolutionary emergence of mind". 321

articulation of phenomena. And what this also means for the rest of the research he pursues in the *New Science* is that Vico draws the conclusion that in a very real sense there is not any unknowable 'prehistory' to speak of, because understanding the present depends on the past for its meaning, and understanding the past equally depends on the present.²¹² The practical consequence of the concept of *corso-ricorso* is that there is a part of every stage in human history within every other part.

²¹² Benedetto Croce, who was one of Vico's main interpreters, shared this belief that all history is, in the final analysis, contemporary.

The children of the human race

Introduction

The *New Science* addresses the universal human impulse to know the past by offering the reader a portal on the moment when distinctly human thinking begins. What Vico calls the Age of Gods, or Poets, is the threshold of a lucid world that replaces the darkness of the primordial mind and represents the transition between the Vico's race of giants and humanity properly speaking. The nature of thought in this *corso* is characterized by strong images and emotions, and it is contrasted from the preceding period of feral wandering in which man lived like a brute without true society and vocal language.²¹³ In his description of these developments, Vico will establish his position that man's sociability is the result of the acquisition of language, and not that the possession of language is evidence of man's innate sociability. Vico also calls this phase the poetic age; for now imaginative thoughts achieve a narrative structure, the *vera narratio*, that the giants lacked. This early form of creative thought is characterized by idealized syn-

²¹³ Vico's concept of the 'erramento ferino' (feral wandering) of early man owes much to Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, Book V, 925-1457. In the final edition of the *Scienza nuova* (1744), perhaps to avoid trouble with church authorities, he omits any direct reference to Lucretius which was in the earlier versions. See Gino Bedani, *Vico Revisited: Orthodoxy, Naturalism and Science in the Scienza Nuova* (Berg: Oxford, 1989), 92-96, for more about this.

theses of strong emotions inspired by natural phenomena; Vico calls these the imaginative universals (*universali fantastici*).²¹⁴

The imaginative universals and the common mental dictionary

[T]he first men, the children, as it were, of the human race, not being able to form intelligible class concepts of things, had a natural need to create poetic characters; that is, imaginative class concepts or universals, to which, as to certain models or ideal portraits, to reduce all the particular species which resembled them.²¹⁵

These constructs are explained as a body of myths that symbolise universal forces in nature, and when they are combined they operate as a body of fables, or ideal portraits of types, from which concepts are engendered. It is a thinking characterized by metaphorical tropes heavily endowed with natural references. Vico distinguishes this form of thought from that of the Hebrews, who were able to understand divine imperatives directly through articulate speech, while the gentile nations, on the other hand, had to discover divine intentions through their own human actions. The imaginative universals are not directly transmitted to the gentiles in the form of ready-made concepts, but are painstakingly acquired by them in phase with the developmental status of their own customs and habits, which themselves are responses to utilitarian needs. Now, in the poetic phase, mute gestures that Vico says characterized the earliest human language combine in sequence and become vocal language:

²¹⁴ Vico uses several terms for his theory of the imaginative universals: *caratteri poetici* (NS 34, 68, 81, 209, 381, 416, 429, & 431); *caratteri fantastici* (NS 562, 762, 772, 783, 808, 809, 816, & 818); *generi fantastici* (NS 34, 209, 403, & 495); *generi poetici* (NS 809 & 819); *universali fantastici* (209, 381, 460, & 933); and *universali poetici* (934 & 1033). If Vico employs them with any systematic criteria, I have not been able to find it. I will use *imaginative universals* for all the variations.

²¹⁵ NS 209.

The philosophers and philologists should have all begun to treat of the origins of languages and letters from the following principles. (1) That the first men of the gentile world conceived ideas of things by imaginative characters of animate and mute substances. (2) That they expressed themselves by means of gestures or physical objects which had natural relations with the ideas; for example, three ears of grain, or acting as if swinging a scythe three times, to signify three years. (3) That they thus expressed themselves by a language with natural significations.²¹⁶

The origin of culture, for Vico, is rooted in heuristic adaptation to the environment, rather than the gradual unfolding of a divinely mandated *a priori* rational order, as would be the case if history were a pre-determined sequence of events and institutions.²¹⁷ He is making the case that human behaviour is not the result of an innate capacity for reason, but instead is the product of material conditions operating in history.

The imaginative universals, collectively, constitute what Vico calls a common mental dictionary (*vocabolario mentale comune*).²¹⁸ This 'dictionary' consists of fables and archetypal figures that express fundamental social structures and activities - birth, death, burial, harvest, hunt, marriage, war, peace, etc. - common to mankind as a whole, although its vocabulary differs from culture to culture, according to local conditions:

Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth.²¹⁹

This axiom is a great principle which establishes the common sense of the human race as the criterion taught to the nations by divine providence to define what is certain in the natural law of the gentes. And the nations reach this certainty by recognizing the underlying agreements

²¹⁶ NS 431. Also see 401.

²¹⁷ I will discuss the problem that the *ideal eternal history* (*la storia ideale eterna*) presents to human freedom in the Conclusion. For the moment, it should suffice to say that man's history is entirely his own creation; nowhere in the *New Science* does God appear as an immanent being that intervenes directly in human affairs.

²¹⁸ NS 161, 162, 482, 483.

²¹⁹ NS 144.

which, despite variations of detail, obtain among them all in respect of this law. Thence issues the mental dictionary for assigning origins to all the diverse articulated languages. It is by means of this dictionary that the ideal eternal history is conceived, which gives us the histories in time of all nations.²²⁰

There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern.²²¹

Vico believes that all languages share similar concepts, although their forms differ from place to place, and that this provides evidence of a common human mind. His meaning, however, is not that there exists an innate 'essential' human language (à la Leibniz), rather that because people everywhere perform similar actions they create comparable concepts in the doing, and in that way their minds develop along similar paths.²²² It is for this reason that Vico, reaching back to the etymology of *ποιέω* (to make, create, or produce), calls the age when humans first formulate this vocabulary 'poetic', because man is the maker of language, and language is his tool:

The first men of the gentile nations, children of the nascent mankind, created things according to their own ideas. But this creation was infinitely different from that of God. For God, in his purest intelligence, knows things, and, by knowing them, creates them; but they, in their robust ignorance, did it by virtue of a wholly corporeal imagination. And because it was quite corporeal, they did it with marvellous sublimity; a sublimity such and so great that it excessively per-

²²⁰ NS 145.

²²¹ NS 161.

²²² Vico says in *On the Study Methods of Our Time* (*De nostri temporis studiorum ratione*, 1708), 40, that "genius is a product of language, not language of genius".

turbed the very persons who by imagining did the creating, for which they were called “poets,” which is Greek for “creators”.²²³

This ‘instrument’, the common mental dictionary, has specific utilitarian value because it permits him to forge a common body of thought from which social cohesiveness is established. When he acquires it, man’s period of feral wandering effectively ends. Over time, these shared notions are passed down from generation to generation and a cultural tradition develops within a society that allows its members to formulate a common identity that transcends the immediacy of their surroundings and has persistence; in short, their history rests on the foundation of the acquisition of mythic archetypes.

Popular thoughts and privileged thinking

The thought of Jove, Vico says, coincides with the beginning of man’s socialization. But it is not clear if he meant that the *idea* of a god (and then religion) stems from a fear of nature and that man then *creates* a god in his imagination with the aim of establishing a dialogue with a ‘person’ in order to placate and bend it to his will, or that religion is a sort of ‘political stratagem’ created by powerful members of society to bully or coerce the weaker lot. The reason his position is ambiguous is that Vico says the idea of Jove occurs simultaneously with the apparition of the first diviners (*divinari*):

Jove was born naturally in poetry as a divine character or imaginative universal, to which everything having to do with the auspices was referred by all the ancient gentile nations, which must therefore all have been poetic by nature. Their poetic wisdom began with this poetic metaphysics, which contemplated God by the attribute of his providence; and they were called theo-

²²³ NS 376.

logical poets, or sages who understood the language of the gods expressed in the auspices of Jove; and were properly called divine in the sense of diviners, from *divinari*, to divine or predict.²²⁴

The poetic wisdom (*sapientia poetica*) can be interpreted as being the product of popular culture *or* of an elite clique, the theological poets, who foist the elements of religion on the rest of society. This question is hard to answer because Vico has superbly made his intentions interpretable either way with equal reasonableness. However, for whatever the motivation, his position is clear that the imitation of natural forces in religious ritual is performed to take possession of those powers in nature. The humanization of natural phenomena has the effect of enlarging man's imaginative universe, for by it he establishes a correspondence between his own emotional states and the powers in nature, and in this process of interpretation he becomes the measure by which things are judged. Vico says this about the birth of religion:

It is impossible that bodies should be minds, yet it was believed that the thundering sky was Jove. And nothing is dearer to poets than singing the marvels wrought by sorceresses by means of incantations. All this is to be explained by a hidden sense the nations have of the omnipotence of God. From this sense springs another by which all peoples are naturally led to do infinite honours to divinity. In this manner the poets founded religions among the gentiles.²²⁵

The establishment of the institution of religion creates a standard of legitimate behaviour that is of benefit to society, and proscribes other behaviour, in the form of taboos, which would harm it. In this way, negative moral injunctions, in their overall application, permit an expansion of the conditions that foster socialization:²²⁶

²²⁴ NS 381.

²²⁵ NS 383.

²²⁶ Georges Bataille, in his essay *La peinture préhistorique : Lascaux ou la naissance de l'art*, (Skira, Genève, 1955) said that sociologists and historians of religion have failed to appreciate the universal significance

From what has been said up to this point it is concluded that divine providence, apprehended by such human sense as could have been possessed by rough, wild, and savage men who in despair of nature's succours desired something superior to nature to save them (which is the first principle on which we established the method of this Science), permitted them to be deceived into fearing the false divinity of Jove because he could strike them with lightning. Thus, through the thick clouds of those first tempests, intermittently lit by those flashes, they made out this great truth: that divine providence watches over the welfare of all mankind. So that this Science becomes in this principle aspect a rational civil theology of divine providence, which began in the vulgar wisdom of the lawgivers, who founded the nations by contemplating God under the attribute of providence, and which is completed by the esoteric wisdom of the philosophers, who give a rational demonstration of it in their natural theology.²²⁷

The theocratic class of the first lawgivers is composed of priests who exercise divination and 'make sense' of the world for men: in effect, they do the 'thinking' for the masses, and their interpretation of natural phenomena is sanctioned by the consolidation of political power for its legitimacy. This strict correlation between satisfying the "necessities of social life" and the ideas which make that possible is tied into the overarching theme of the *New Science* as a whole:²²⁸

In search of these natures of human institutions our Science proceeds by a severe analysis of human thoughts about the human necessities or utilities of social life, which are the two perennial springs of the natural law of the gentes. In its second principal aspect, our Science is therefore a history of human ideas, on which it seems the metaphysics of the human mind must proceed.²²⁹

of taboo in the making of humans : « Encore une fois, le sociologue et l'historien des religions n'envisagent chaque fois que les tabous particuliers, sans se dire avant tout que, généralement, *sans interdit, il n'est pas de vie humaine* (my italics). 31.

²²⁷ NS 385.

²²⁸ NS 34.

²²⁹ NS 347.

Whether the fables of gods were initially popular creations or political ‘lessons’ that were imposed from on high is an open question, but Vico says that their interpretation and instrumentation were ultimately handled by the diviners. The fables fulfil the public need to explain the world in terms they can relate to, and because the keys to their meaning are held by the diviners they are held in awe and reverence:

It follows that the first science to be learned should be mythology or the interpretation of fables; for, as we shall see, all the histories of the gentiles have their beginnings in fables, which were the first histories of the gentile nations. By such a method the beginnings of the sciences as well as of the nations are to be discovered, for they sprang from the nations and from no other source. *It will be shown throughout this work that they had their beginnings in the public needs or utilities of the peoples and that they were later perfected as acute individuals applied their reflection to them.*²³⁰

The logic of metaphor

Before the poetic age ‘thought’ consisted in dissociated mental images and language was a system of mute gestures and simple imperatives.²³¹ Vico considered the transition from sign to vocal language, and the use of ‘poetic characters’, to be the ‘master key’ of the *New Science*. The imaginative universals are an articulation of fundamental concepts that acquire a syntax that goes beyond simple coordinated responses, however intelligent, to environmental conditions. In addition, they have the generative capability to form new concepts from previous ones by which vocabulary is expanded. Nevertheless, the key to the “master key” is contained in the idea that imaginative universals

²³⁰ NS 51.

²³¹ NS 401: “The first language in the first mute times of the nations must have begun with signs, whether gestures or physical objects, which had natural relations to the ideas [to be expressed]”.

have their foundation in emotional states, and that their 'logic' is rooted in natural reference:²³²

We find that the principle of these origins both of languages and of letters lies in the fact that the first gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters. This discovery, *which is the master key of this Science*, has cost us the persistent research of almost all our literary life, because with our civilized natures we [moderns] cannot at all imagine and can understand only by great toil the poetic nature of these first men. The poetic characters of which we speak were certain imaginative genera (images for the most part of animate substances, of gods or heroes, formed by the imagination) to which they reduced all the species or all the particulars appertaining to each genus; exactly as the fables of human times, such as those of late comedy, are intelligible genera reasoned out by moral philosophy...²³³

In spite of the enormous importance that Vico places on the imaginative universals to explain the genesis of poetic thought, he comes short on proffering a detailed description of why this should be so. The problem is that these archetypes cannot remain static images or icons but must relate to one another as ideas in such a way that a fluidity of thought is engendered by them. It could be that the imaginative universals achieve a narrative quality through the creative interaction of coupling among the basic metaphors that comprise them. The fable,²³⁴ the *vera narratio*, is effectively composed of a sequence of images that correspond to emotional states, e.g., thunder-Jove-power-fear-law, a combination of associations that, though based on natural relationships, later generate concepts which are entirely human creations, such as law. This sequence that moves from emotion to abstraction suggests that emotions themselves are not inde-

²³² NS 494: "The results so far reached by this poetic logic concerning the origins of languages do justice to their first creators. They were rightly regarded as sages in all subsequent times because they gave natural and proper names to things, so that among the Greeks and Latins "name" and "nature" meant the same thing". Also see NS 401 431, 433, 437, 438, 456.

²³³ NS 34.

²³⁴ NS 401 & 403.

pendent states detached from one another but elements of a larger somatic 'grammar'. And as the structure of the fabled narrative becomes more complex with newly spawned concepts, it will come to shape the categories of thought that occupy the spaces of reason. Vico takes great pains to emphasize that this 'poetic' logic precedes the logic of reasoned discourse, for its concern is not with understanding the nomological structure of the world; rather, it is a sense of wanting to grasp and 'manage' the phenomenal experience of nature. Curiosity, in a Heraclitean sense of wanting to see beyond or behind the appearances of things to understand their 'true' nature, Vico says comes later with the first philosophers.²³⁵ It was the necessity, a 'need to know', to produce adequate social institutions which he says came first in the order of mental development, and in his description of the sequence of the appearance of institutions a parallel course is run with the development of words and concepts: new thoughts then arise which reflect the appearance of different social structures. In a word, Vico is saying that human activity is both a *product* and a *shaper* of its environment.²³⁶

Vico believes that of all the poetic tropes metaphor is the most valuable in the construction of conceptual thinking because it alone can establish a relationship between two separate and unlike phenomena, thus allowing man to relate his own physical response to an event with the event itself. In other words, an association is formed between man and nature in such a way that he can begin to compare his own state of being with the world around him, and most importantly in this process the narration of the

²³⁵ NS 499: "For the first kind of crude philosophy used by men was *autopsia*, or the evidence of the senses".

²³⁶ This concept is now the basis of the modern theory of autopoiesis. See Ezequiel A. Di Paolo, '*Autopoiesis, Adaptivity, Teleology, Agency*', in *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences*, v.4, n.7, Dec. 2005, Springer, Netherlands, 429-452.

sequence of natural events become the property of man as he becomes *ipso facto* the maker of his own history:

Thus every metaphor so formed is a fable in brief. This gives a basis for judging the time when metaphors made their appearance in the languages. All the metaphors conveyed by likenesses taken from bodies to signify the operations of abstract minds must date from times when philosophies were taking shape. The proof of this is that in every language the terms needed for the refined arts and recondite sciences are of rustic origins.²³⁷

The function of the imaginative universals represents, for Vico, the first attempt by man to 'make sense' of the world, in the sense of revealing 'facts' about things and constructing new meaning from them. Perhaps Vico's most famous philosophical insight, his well-known epistemological principle the *verum ipsum factum* (the true is the made), which is first found in the *De Antiquissima*,²³⁸ is supported by the "master key" of the *New Science*, the imaginative universals: for if what we can know inside and out is what we have made, then we have made sense of it. And a corollary to this is the implication that there is no underlying structure or meaning to the logic of relationships apart from the one we have created.

Poetic truth

It is not unusual to experience frustration with Vico's concept of poetic truth. It is elusive because it requires one to think in a way that stands diametrically opposed to the analytic tradition or what is normally understood by universals. Typically, without wishing to enter into metaphysical argument, a universal is an ideal aggregate of particular qualities; it can evoke or display them in a general way, but to achieve recogni-

²³⁷ NS 404.

²³⁸ Giambattista Vico, *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians (De Antiquissima Italorum Sapientia, 1710)*, trans. L.M. Palmer (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988).

tion it does not necessarily have to conform to all of them. Overall meaning is extrapolated from isolated instances when particulars are brought into a larger class. In the case of Vico's imaginative universals, he reverses the equation and says that the imaginative creation is the 'true' object of thought, not a fictional composite of ideal attributes. It is important to note the absence of artifice or self-consciousness that is required so that these 'types' can attain a reality in the minds of poetic man that they would otherwise not have if they were perceived as consciously constructed fables or fictions for entertainment or educational purposes, to cite a few examples of their potential use in society:

These fables are ideal truths suited to the merit of those of whom the vulgar tell them; and such falseness to fact as they contain consists simply in failure to give their subjects their due. So that, if we consider the matter well, poetic truth is metaphysical truth, and physical truth which is not in conformity with it should be considered false. Thence springs this important consideration in poetic theory: the true war chief, for example, is the Godfrey that Torquato Tasso imagines; and all the chiefs who do not conform throughout are not true chiefs of war.²³⁹

How does Vico's poetic man come to think of the myths that comprise the imaginative universals as *real* stories in an actual narrative? It is hard for modern man to understand or even imagine how the poetic imagination came to see the world through this prism. For at this time, Vico says, the particular is immediately perceived as the universal, with no reflective judgment to break the spell of the incantatory fables.²⁴⁰ He gives an example of how this is done by children in his own day:

²³⁹ NS 205. See Donald Phillip Verene, *Vico's Science of Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981): "Vico's conception of imaginative universals is not based on a nominalism in which a particular is raised to the level of a universal type and taken to stand for the nature of the class out of which it arises. Instead the reverse is true; particulars are directly conceived as universals". 307.

²⁴⁰ See I. Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000): "But for Vico metaphor and the like constitute a fundamental category through which at a

The nature of children is such that by the ideas and names of the men, women, and things they have known first, they afterward apprehend and name all the men, women, and things that bear any resemblance or relation to the first.²⁴¹

Small children and Vico's poetic man share a lack of artificiality; in both, self-consciousness is not especially strong, yet at the same time they combine ingenuousness with an extraordinary degree of inventiveness and artfulness. At first, these two modes might seem incompatible, as reflective deliberation often plays a decisive part in the making and appreciation of the verbal and visual arts, while man in the childlike state of the poetic age seems entirely unaware of any artifice in his mythologies. Vico's poetic man behaves as if the fables of his imagination are indistinguishable from the natural forces they are meant to mimic. But it is his very lack of self-conscious reflection that makes these metaphorical constructions believable for him. Vico's imaginative universals are very different from allegory, in that they do not effectively try to evoke similarity to the objects they represent: they try to *be* them. For this reason, the creation of the imaginative universals is less an act of belief in the gods and heroes of fables than an incarnation of them in the minds of men; they are archetypes more than individuals in

given stage of development men cannot help viewing reality – which is for them reality itself, neither mere embellishment, nor a repository of secret wisdom, nor the creation of a world parallel to the real world, nor an addition to, or distortion of, reality, harmless or dangerous, deliberate or involuntary: but it is natural, inevitably transient, but, at the time of its birth or growth, the only possible, way of perceiving, interpreting, explaining that is open to men of that particular place and time, at that particular stage of their culture. Such ways of speech, he supposes, only later become artificial or decorative, because men have by then forgotten how they came into being and the purposes for which they were originally used". 128.

²⁴¹ NS 206. I am reminded by this that for little children in Hungary all adults are either called *bacsi* (uncle) or *nini* (auntie). They do this without the slightest affectation and naturally think all adults are either one or the other; they could not possibly understand it being any other way.

their own right. An 'ideal' hero is a later product of humans in which natural attributes are consciously compared to a fictional model.²⁴²

Conclusion

Vico's concept of the imaginative universals seeks to explain the origin of myths and what they meant to their creators. He says that they were inspired by powerful forces of nature, and because they were deeply felt reactions to strong physical events men were not able to distinguish between the literal and figurative meaning of the metaphors they created.²⁴³ The emotional space which these ideas occupied seems to have precluded any possibility of conscious reflection. The question, however, obviously arises how man was able to form these thoughts before he had a well-developed vocabulary with which to think them. One answer from language theory is that man possesses an *a priori* capacity for language, and another from developmental psychology is that mythic archetypes are somehow deeply embedded in our cognitive faculties. After all, does not the ability to form the first fables strongly suggest an innate faculty of reason? That could be, but it is probably not what Vico meant. For in his constructivist epistemology, based on the *verum-factum* principle, experience is fundamental to cognition, and the main idea of Vico's imaginative universals is that the basic concepts of thought stem directly from the type of body human beings possess and the manner in which it interacts with the environment. The paucity of references in the *New Science* to the soul or mention of an essential human nature would seem to support this. Another question

²⁴² One perspective of reading history is that it ultimately ossifies into myth; Vico would say the opposite is true. His idea is that as belief in myth degenerates, the notion that history is literal intensifies. When this occurs, historical interpretation loses its 'narrative' character and becomes nominally 'factual'.

²⁴³ NS 379. For poetic man Jove was in everything, hence the expression "All things are full of Jove" (*Iovis omnia plena*).

that detains the reader is how the imaginative universals can combine to form a vocabulary from which other thoughts are generated, for in order to achieve a narrative function it would appear that there must be elements of a cognitive 'grammar', whether they are conscious or not, that allow one to distinguish between particulars and universals, for there could be very little reasoning if the two were not separate. Vico explains that this vocabulary originates from the relationship among the fables themselves, but never mentions a specific cause that permits the organization of the fables into a narrative structure. It could be that Vico intended to say, but never quite spelled out, that the very nature of the human body provides this organizing principle. This might explain why so many of the fables he discusses are founded on metaphors inspired by the body, and their emotional content provides a structure from which narrative can emerge. I offer this interpretation because Vico never suggests that the source of the *vera narratio* is anything other than man's own imagination. For Vico, man's fables are not divinely inspired; rather, his fables inspire a sense of the divine. For in the age of gods, before abstract thinking, imagination does not stand in opposition to rational thought, and general terms that stand for the classes of things contained in the imaginative universals still do not exist.

The architects of reason

Introduction

This chapter focuses on the abstract concepts which Vico called the intelligible universals.²⁴⁴ The last chapter described the poetic archetypes that dominated thinking in the age of the gods; theocracies were the form of government and social institutions were rudimentary. In the age which followed, the heroic age, feudal institutions began to appear and dominant individuals formed families that acquired political power. It is well to keep in mind, though, that Vico does not draw a very distinct boundary between the two ages. There is a gradual transformation from one phase to the next and, as should be expected, the things which give character to one or the other are sometimes contemporaneous. Here, will be examined the origin of these concepts, how the transition from the imaginative universals was accompanied by new political institutions, and the role of the intelligible universals in man's socialisation. Of particular concern will be the role that imaginative thought exercised in the making of these new ideas and concepts. It will be argued that the two types of thinking share common ground in natural references and represent an unbroken process of cognitive development, rather than a punctuated transformation of mind.

²⁴⁴ Vico's term for them includes the intelligible universals, the abstract universals (*universale astratti*), the intelligible genera, the rational universals, and the philosophic universals.

While natural phenomena are given human expression in Vico's imaginative universals, the intelligible universals open a new door to experience by describing the subjective understanding of human experience. Vico's intelligible universals are abstract concepts, whereas the imaginative universals render natural attributes in idealized form. Apart from the difference in content of the two types of universals, the most striking contrast between them is the nature of their thought processes: thought with the imaginative universals seems to be characterised by a series of static images which follow one another in succession, while the intelligible universals appear to permit an uninterrupted flow of fluid images, owing to the common mental dictionary that was sufficiently advanced by then to establish connections among a very large body of forms. The other distinguishing feature of this period is that self-conscious reflection occurs, and tied up with this is a greater exercise of judgment. As the type and number of institutions increase, so do the decisions needed to effectively maintain them rise in complexity. Vico binds the appearance of rational thought tightly to the idea of utility:

The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being (*nascimento*) at certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being.²⁴⁵

Compared to the extensive discussion devoted to the imaginative universals, Vico wrote but comparatively little on the intelligible universals; there are nearly twice as many references to the former than the latter. Does this give one reason to think he considered the imaginative universals more important in the shaping of the mind? Or, it could be that for Vico their importance was not in question, but their genesis remained

²⁴⁵ NS 147.

to some extent inscrutable to him. The obscurity of his explanations of how the transition was made to abstract thinking would seem to support this idea.

The origin of the intelligible universals

This passage describes the creation of an intelligible universal, in this case *anger*, from an image of the imaginative universals (*blood boiling in the heart*). The new concept is a synthetic creation composed from a poetic phrase: it has a greater economy of expression and specificity that was not achievable in the language of poets. However, it should not be overlooked that Vico's example also underscores the essential objectivity of the metaphorical phrase, and the metaphorical basis of our 'objective' language:

From all this it appears to have been demonstrated that, by a necessity of human nature, poetic style arose before prose style; just as, by the same necessity, the fables, or imaginative universals, arose before the rational or philosophic universals, which were formed through the medium of prose speech. For after the poets had formed poetic speech by associating particular ideas, as we have fully shown, the peoples went on to form prose speech by contracting into a single word, as into a genus, the parts which poetic speech had associated. Take for example the poetic phrase "the blood boils in my heart," based on a property natural, eternal, and common to all mankind. They took the blood, the boiling, and the heart, and made of them a single word, as it were a genus, called in Greek *stomachos*, in Latin *ira*, and in Italian *collera*. Following the same pattern, hieroglyphs and heroic letters [or emblems] were reduced to a few vulgar letters, as genera assimilating innumerable diverse articulate sounds; a feat requiring consummate genius. By means of these vulgar genera, both of words and letters, the minds of the peoples grew quicker and developed powers of abstraction, and the way was thus prepared for the coming of the philosophers, who formed intelligible genera".²⁴⁶

²⁴⁶ NS 460.

Whereas the poetic mind was largely expressive of sense perceptions (in particular sight), the heroic mind (associated with the intelligible universals) is more reflective. The intelligible universal represents a turn of mind wherein ideas are abstracted from concrete particulars. Are these minds entirely distinct, or does the heroic mind share characteristics of the poetic mind? The following suggests that the second interpretation is correct:

This axiom gives us the universal principle of etymology in all languages: words are carried over from bodies and from the properties of bodies to signify the institutions of the mind and spirit.²⁴⁷

Vico means that the universals, whether the imaginative or the intelligible, are ultimately grounded in the body, and as their universality is assured by this connection to the same human neurological constitution, there is a foundation on which to establish a science of human thought.²⁴⁸ And because different peoples share certain basic cultural characteristics,²⁴⁹ as they do a physiognomy, it would appear that the unveiling of mental processes is coupled with the ability to understand the mental states of others: man acquires introspection through participation in and observation of the behaviour of others. Of course, there are more factors than this that are needed to explain the origin of self-consciousness, but, as a start, it seems reasonable to suggest that without the direct participation in communal life it would be impossible for human beings to develop that sense. And it is essentially Vico's position that the mind is constituted by the accumula-

²⁴⁷ NS 236 & 237.

²⁴⁸ Another way of saying this could be 'the extent to which we share a human nature is the extent to which we share a body'. To counter the objection that the intelligible universals relate to abstract, and not physical notions, I would point out that even when we are discussing the components of institutions the language is often couched in physical, if not bodily, terms: "the long arm of the law", "the health of the body politic", "the pulse of public opinion", and "the voice of the people". Furthermore, notions judged nonsensical typically have no way of being expressed by bodily metaphors.

²⁴⁹ NS 9, 10, 11, & 12. The first institutions, divine and human, which are the principles of humanity, are for Vico religion, marriage, and burial.

tion of private and public experiences in memory that are acquired in social activities: mind is not something that can exist separate from the sources of thought that nurture it. It almost goes without saying that the Cartesian view that a faculty of mind exists that has “privileged access”²⁵⁰ to its functions, is wholly alien to Vico’s thought. There is no ‘theatre of the mind’ in the *New Science* that has introspective awareness apart from the phenomenal world.

The transition from the imaginative to the intelligible universals

The intelligible universals are the first abstract concepts, and by that is meant they are products of thought that represent the distillation, as it were, of an ‘essential’ or ‘universal’ property that is to be found in many particular instances. The identification of common properties among things permitted the formation of these universal ideas, which opened an immaterial world for man to discover:

This axiom is the principle of poetic sentences, which are formed by feelings of passion and emotion, whereas philosophic sentences are formed by reflection and reasoning. The more the latter rise toward universals, the closer they approach the truth; the more the former descend to particulars, the more certain they become.²⁵¹

Universals are, by definition, things that can be transferred and understood across time and cultures, and this is true of Vico’s imaginative and intelligible universals. The transitivity of the first type, however, seems to be more easily explained than that of the second. This is because the imaginative universals rely on the metaphorical description of physical characteristics, which are readily apparent to people everywhere, while

²⁵⁰ This well-known meaningful expression is from Gilbert Ryle’s *The Concept of Mind* [1949] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

²⁵¹ *NS* 219.

the intelligible universals, which illustrate abstract concepts, depend on the existence of institutional structures for their confirmation, and these, of course, require symbols to be manifested.²⁵² Vico offers an interesting solution to how the transition from the poetic to the rational was accomplished by suggesting that, at the beginning of the heroic age, symbols mediated the transfer of meaning from signs to abstract concepts: the *imāginēs* in the Roman Empire, the use of monumental architecture in the ancient Near East, Egypt and Rome, and public insignia everywhere were designed to maintain order and values, create roles and positions, and inspire patriotic sentiments:

The second kind of speech, corresponding to the age of heroes, was said by the Egyptians to have been spoken by symbols. To these may be reduced the heroic emblems, which must have been the mute comparisons which Homer calls *sēmata* (the signs in which the heroes wrote). In consequence they must have been metaphors, images, similitudes, or comparisons, which, having passed into articulate speech, supplied all the resources of poetic expression.²⁵³

Even though the objects of reference are different for the two kinds of universals, the way in which the mind extrapolates personal meaning from them might be essentially the same. For in the case of the former, a metaphor is ‘completed’ by the listener with details that relate to personal experiences, and in this way it is made relevant.²⁵⁴ While for the latter, abstract concepts cannot be compared to personal experiences because their contextual reference is based on institutions, which are by their nature pub-

²⁵² Obvious examples of this, that correspond to Vico’s first three institutions, are ritual clothing and devices in the case of religion and marriage, and prescribed behaviour in the observance of burial rites.

²⁵³ NS 438.

²⁵⁴ See A. Ortony, “*Why Metaphors Are Necessary and Not Just Nice*”, in *Educational Theory*, v. 25, n. 1, Winter, 1975, 45-53. Ortony claims that when we understand a statement we essentially “reconstruct” the event in a way that relates it to our personal experiences. This process of completing a mental picture is called “particularization”, which allows for comprehension of distant phenomena without the necessity of literal reference.

lic. However, the intelligible universals are understood by individuals by virtue of their participation in institutional structures, because institutions provide the conceptual reference points, and at this time individuals acquire a 'public' persona that interacts with those institutions, in the same way that the imaginative universals are related to nature.

For Vico, civil society is the flower of philosophical reason, but it is rooted in the 'non-rational' foundation of religion for its establishment and preservation, for Vico believes that religion is the only power strong enough to ensure civil order. That this 'non-rational' institution should be the grounding of social order contrasts with the thinking of much of the Enlightenment, in which it is easy to find a tension between man and god that is absent in the *New Science*. It might be that this is simply a case of Vico paying lip-service to orthodox religion, but it might also be a signal that Vico thought the main purpose of religious ritual, in the age of man, was to provide an outlet for the imagination to operate in a controlled 'rational' environment. This would be in keeping with his stated beliefs that the imagination plays a strong role in shaping even rational thought, and it certainly makes sense in light of the absence in his writings to any Messianic reference. It would appear that Vico is saying that religion, especially the mystical variety, satisfies a human need to experience the fantastic, but at the same time it ensures that it is exercised within the confines of reason. Within this context, it should not be forgotten that Vico was a child of the Baroque and, as the central element in Baroque aesthetics, the imagination is employed to persuade the intellect and direct the emotions to attain religious understanding, which, of course, is also a form of social control.

The intelligible universals and man's socialisation

The intelligible universals are associated with new *personalities* that replace the immobility of the static types associated with the imaginative universals.²⁵⁵ New social environments, with increasingly complex roles, required something else to replace the worn-out formula of the previous age, in which people and animals “betray the same constancy of disposition”.²⁵⁶ The old prototypes display a single nature, usually in conformity with the animals they are compared to, and rarely do they exhibit more than two character dispositions. But now the heroes, who have semi-divine status, and from whom the nascent noble class will claim ascendancy, replace the gods in the minds of men as the arbitrators of their destinies. This new theoretic culture is marked by a standard of reasoning that values utility more than mysticism (but does not abolish it by any means, for the reasons given above), whereby its institutions encourage practical solutions to problems rather than chiefly relying on the incantations of priests. What could possibly have caused this shift in priorities? For one thing, it could have been due to the need to live in closer proximity to others, which was a result of the new feudal-like order that Vico says characterizes this period, and which fostered the development of self-consciousness as a means to function more effectively in a social reality that had more restrictive physical boundaries but also a less constrictive mental environment. This would mean that the ‘average’ person could, and had to, rely on his own wits more so than someone who in a ‘natural’ environment was powerless to control the forces of na-

²⁵⁵ An analogy in art from the period that coincides with Vico’s classical heroic age can be seen in the development of Archaic Greek statues where the rigidity of the earlier versions of the *kouroi* (youths) and *korai* (maidens) give way to more naturalistic and less formalized examples of the human body. Just so, with the mind, there is an impulse to surpass the restrictive limits imposed by formulaic constructions.

²⁵⁶ This phrase, by Snell, refers to the single-aspect character traits which the Homeric heroes demonstrate. See Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind in Greek Philosophy and Literature* [1953] (New York: Dover Publications, 1982). 201.

ture around him, and who depended on religion to affect it and priests to interpret its signs.

The language that this new social reality required was based more on civic than natural terms. In the 'unsophisticated' social environment of the poetic mind, successful actions had almost exclusively utilitarian value, and natural referents provided not only the content but also the context of thought. The same cannot be said of the abstract mind, for its terms are often more normative than descriptive. This happens because the subjects of actions, these 'proto-individuals', themselves determine how they will be affected by their environment, and that is very different from being unconsciously shaped by it. One of the most important effects of the employment of normative terms is that man acquired a personal sense of moral responsibility, as he became a maker of words which recognised an order in his thinking that could stand alone without nature. The new system was more economical and efficient, at least for the new civic and urban environments, and it reflected man's concern with his place in the world and not only the world he had a place in.²⁵⁷ Vico believed that through social constructions, institutions and their material artefacts, that further concepts develop; for Vico, thought does not exist before the language is created that allows those thoughts. How does he explain that this process starts? Unfortunately, he doesn't exactly. My understanding of Vico's meaning on this point is that the metaphor-based thinking of the poetic age could not 'keep

²⁵⁷ An example of how language became more 'synthetic' is this from *NS* 175: "Varro had the diligence to collect thirty thousand names of gods – for the Greeks counted that many. These were related to as many needs of the physical, moral, economic, or civil life of the earliest times". Their characteristics were later integrated and their number reduced to the twelve classical Olympian gods. This is an example of how the formation of a class concept was more economical and satisfied "fit" in an increasingly complex society. In evolution theory the requirement of economy of fit states that if one action or term can stand for or symbolize others then its utility will be more extensive and intensive than it would otherwise have been if it were local and restricted.

up' with the sheer number of new relations that a civil society engendered. Here is an example. When things are created they are compared to other things and their associations then become the way other things are interpreted. The metaphors of the 'course' of history or the 'flow' of thought could not have been employed if there had not been a 'road' or 'fountain' to compare them to. And these are, of course, social constructs. The objection might be raised that the comparison could have been to a 'course' of water, like a river, or a 'flow', like a welling up of tears, but in these cases there would not have been present a goal or end, which is implicit in the idea of a road, and that of a container, with a fountain. So when we speak of history as a 'course' we have in some degree adopted the assumption that it has a goal or end, and time as a 'flow' that culminates in a vast pool of cosmic experience. So, it would appear correct to say that the natural and social-based metaphors are similar up to a point, but that later the distinctions between the literal aspects of their referents determine the *kinds* of thought one might be able to have: only the road, and not the river, can serve as a metaphor for a 'journey', because one has a purpose or direction and the other does not. Vico's primary insight into the origin of the abstract universals is that socially-constructed artefacts permit concepts that natural ones do not.

It is unlikely that a society would have made the transition from one type of thinking to another if the *needs* of that society had not radically changed; something advantageous must have been gained. The question is what the intelligible universals offered that the imaginative universals did not. It seems that they were able to condense many characteristics, as was shown in the example of the gods being reduced from thousands to a few, into a manageable number that did not depend on intimate knowledge of

many particulars to have meaning. In this way, it is conceivable that mutual understanding of abstract concepts could transpire within a stratified society composed of individuals with widely varying experiences and backgrounds. But even though the older form of thought had lost its power for social organization, it still remained visible in religious structures and ‘mystical’ thinking and provided a context for social cohesiveness that the structure of abstract thinking was never to entirely replace, even today. And that is why it would be a mistake to think that the transition from the imaginative to the intelligible universals was sequential and not transitive: for though the imaginative mind, by itself, had functional utility, what it acquires in relation to the abstract mind is symbolic utility; it does not lose its importance, rather its role is changed.²⁵⁸ Vico shows that where one type of thinking ends the other begins, and that the evidence for a connection between the two minds is that they share a foundation of root metaphors that undergo transformations.

Conclusion

The imaginative and intelligible universals are the language products of universally-shared social structures, rather than evidence of an innate capacity for language, a *lingua mentis*. The distinction is important because it underscores Vico’s belief that our intellectual development is essentially acquired and not the expression of innate or deep ‘hard-wired’ structures. Other than the primal emotions, which he mentions earlier on in

²⁵⁸ The distinction between utilitarian and symbolic utility is not at all neat. For example, in art *trompe-l’œil* can contribute to a pleasing effect in design or décor, and nothing more, but it can also serve the purpose of establishing architectural harmony and symmetry in building that were it absent would cause the structure to suffer an inconclusiveness in its proportions that would render it less effective in its everyday workability. False doors and windows in some buildings can become just as important as “real” ones if they provide balance that was otherwise lacking. Their functional importance is guaranteed not by their structural contribution but by their representational integrity.

the *New Science* in the descriptions of the beasts, there is little in Vico's account of man that could be considered inherent to his nature. And because of this, Vico's discussion of the language universals also seems to express, albeit obliquely at times, something of his view of human nature overall. For the belief that language and thought are acquired in the process of 'acting out' our roles in society, and are not innate, would seem to indicate that he wanted to draw attention away from the traditional Christian doctrine of a divinely-created being, possessed with an eternal soul and a rational nature, and focus it instead on an image of man as a socially-constructed creature. Such an idea, obviously, would not be easy to accommodate in the church-dominated intellectual arena of early eighteenth-century Naples, and if his intention was to challenge this core belief of the church it is easy to understand why Vico would avoid arousing the ire of ecclesiastical authority, by being placed on the *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* (List of Prohibited Books) or worse, and let his reader come to his own conclusions. However, though Vico remains notoriously cloudy on this subject, one can surely point out that what passes for human nature in Vico is not a combination of ontologically necessary characteristics, even though they are universally present. What Vico wants to say is that the reason why people everywhere perform the same actions, say the same things, and think the same thoughts is that there are similar favourable responses to meeting similar environmental conditions, and not because their 'nature' requires them to comply to a certain law or code. From this perspective, one might rather adopt the term 'human behaviours' over 'human nature', or at least open the door to the possibility of 'human natures'. Vico would say that those behaviours or natures, although they are not metaphysical necessities, do seem to follow a universal pattern, which he calls the *ideal eternal history*. He believes the identification of this pattern allows for a scientific understanding of the how

and why people behave as they do in history, but he is careful to show that it is not the pattern that makes people what they are, in the sense of a pre-ordained order, but that this pattern is replicated everywhere not by necessity but choice: in other words, people make the pattern, the pattern does not make people. Nevertheless, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the ontology of the imaginative and intelligible universals is somehow insufficiently explained by Vico's account of utilitarian responses to environmental challenges, principally because it does not explain the uniformity of the *content* of concepts with the same general authority that, for example, in evolution theory natural selection is the cause of change in nature. Something more than what Vico expresses overtly in the *New Science* is needed to explain how the ideas contained in complex rationality achieve their universality. Though Vico's *explanation* of the ontology of the thought universals may need further argument, his *description* of them is unarguably attractive. All things considered, perhaps Vico's greatest achievement in his treatment of the imaginative and intelligible universals is in showing how: imaginative thinking has a role to play in rational thought; that the rational is not discontinuous with the non-rational; and that the *non-rational* is not synonymous with the *irrational*.

A practice of wisdom

The world of nations continues the world of nature

The focus of this chapter is Vico's account of rational humanity. The third phase of human thought comes after the poetic and heroic stages and before the 'barbarism of reflection' reduces humanity to its earlier beastly condition. For Vico, this stage of rational humanity is "the true and proper nature of man".²⁵⁹ In a sense, this *corso* represents the culmination of history, with the qualification, of course, that 'progress' in Vico is always relative to his theory of *anacyclosis*, the cyclical movement of history. As mentioned in the previous chapter, rationality, for Vico, is in important ways a continuation of imaginative thinking, but it also shares a precision and clarity of thought not unlike Descartes' "clear and distinct ideas". However, Vico's idea of rationality differs in important ways from a Rationalist conception of thought. For Vico believed that the 'non-rational' elements of feelings and emotions continue to exert a powerful influence even on the shape of logical thinking, and that it is impossible to ever entirely separate them. Vico's term for the establishment of institutions in nature is the "world of nations", and the nature of those institutions is largely determined by the type of thinking which is dominant at a given time. This may appear a self-evident observation from the point of view afforded today by cultural anthropology, but in Vico's time belief in a golden age when humanity

²⁵⁹ NS 973. Vico also describes rational humanity in 326, 927, and 924.

had attained fulfilment was still a current idea in some places. What Vico wants to emphasise in his account of rationality is that it did not spring Athena-like fully formed from the head of Zeus, a discontinuous leap from pre-conceptual thought, rather that it has its roots in the 'world of nature', and it is there that the foundations of thought will be discovered:

But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.²⁶⁰

These modifications of the mind sustain the human race from its potentiality to actuality, to borrow the Aristotelian language of entelechy, which Vico seems to have adopted when he says that the essential nature of man is manifested in its fully realized state. When Vico says that the rational phase of man is mankind *tutta spiegata*, completely developed, this is his meaning, and he explains that this unfolding reveals "the true and proper nature of man":

It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and) we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science, since we despaired of finding it from the philosophers and philologists, but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends, made means to serve wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth.²⁶¹

In these passages, Vico's assertion that mankind is the cause of the 'world of nations' means that there was never an Eden, an Arcadia, or any other such oasis that was

²⁶⁰ NS 331.

²⁶¹ NS 1108.

not of man's making, and this assertion is not, at least in most places, as controversial today as it was in his age. However, his characterisation of rational humanity as "the true and proper nature of man" is an idea that conflicts with the absence of teleology in the principles that guide developmental evolution today, as it implies that there is a metaphysical source of causation separate from simple adaptation to nature.

The nature of fully developed human reason

Developed rationality is the mark of thinking in Vico's human age, which follows the poetic or divine and the heroic. It is distinguished from the other two by self-conscious reflection.²⁶² When Vico speaks of 'reason' and 'wisdom' in the *New Science* it is often in relation to *utility* and compatible notions of socially appropriate behaviour, such as observance of ritual. In this sense, his meaning of rationality is that of a practical understanding of the world. He does not refer to the 'depth' of understanding, nor of an 'essence' (either particular or general) of mind, for his interest in 'truth' seems to have been fundamentally concerned with its instrumental value. From this perspective, rationality appears as a coping mechanism that ensures man's survival in the world of nature: it is not an entity detached from the world with a self-serving purpose to 'know itself':

The natural equity of *fully developed human reason* is a *practice of wisdom* in affairs of utility, since wisdom in its broad sense is nothing but the science of making such use of things as their nature dictates.²⁶³

²⁶² When Vico refers to the thinking that belongs to any of these ages, he means that it was the most common at that time, not that only it existed then. It follows that in the human age not everyone was 'rational'.

²⁶³ NS 326.

Vico's "practice of wisdom" is very close to an Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*, a practical wisdom of affairs in life that is intrinsically related to virtuous action and observance of ritual. It is not simply a theoretical understanding of the world, but requires action as well as thought for its realization.

Wisdom is the faculty which commands all the disciplines by which we acquire all the sciences and arts that make up humanity. ... Man, in his proper being as man, consists of mind and spirit, or, if we prefer, of intellect and will. It is the function of wisdom to fulfil both these parts in man, the second by way of the first, to the end that by a mind illuminated by knowledge of the highest institutions, the spirit may be led to choose the best. The highest institutions in the universe are those turned toward and conversant with God; the best are those which look to the good of all mankind.²⁶⁴

As previously noted, in Vico, human nature passes through three major phases – the divine, the heroic, and the human – but it is to the third phase, "rational humanity, which is the true and proper nature of man",²⁶⁵ that he assigns fulfilment to the human journey:

The third was human nature, intelligent and hence modest, benign, and reasonable, recognizing for laws conscience, reason, and duty.²⁶⁶

Vico's reason for how we can speak of a common humanity, in spite of wide divergences in social development and forms of reasoning, is because of the providential pattern that all peoples in the world follow, for this ensures that separate human identities coalesce into the same universal history. The initial impetus for human socialization, Vico says, was that the fear of offending an all-powerful creator led to elaborate forms of

²⁶⁴ NS 364.

²⁶⁵ NS 973.

²⁶⁶ NS 918.

ritual performed in the hope of placating its wrath. But in Vico's third phase, the providential order of universal history is fulfilled through reason's appeal to virtue and justice, as ends in themselves. And as a corollary to this development, as rationality becomes the norm of thought, the gods themselves are imagined to behave more virtuously, in contrast to their former selfish and capricious natures. It would appear, thus, that mankind confirms the idea he has formed of himself in the gods he imagines:

All this was ordained by providence to the end that, since virtuous actions were no longer prompted by religious sentiments as formerly, philosophy should make the virtues understood in their idea, and by dint of reflection thereon, if men were without virtue they should at least be ashamed of their vices.²⁶⁷

Vico's rationality is effective in forming beliefs and taking actions, but he also believes that shame and fear must be retained as forces in society for those who cannot be moved by rational persuasion. It seems reasonable to suppose, then, that Vico thought we could possess the capacity to behave rationally, but not that we were *naturally* rational creatures. The ubiquity of rational forms of thought in the human age is due to the presence of certain institutions (e.g. the law, political legitimacy) that inspire and nourish reason, rather than the possession of an innate sense of reason. It is very much in the whole scheme of history in the *New Science*, in particular the concept of the *corsi* and *ricorsi*, that when ideas and beliefs cease to serve a purpose they become redundant and are replaced. And if that means also having to stop behaving 'rationally', then reason itself is abandoned and societies adopt or revert to 'irrational' behaviour. The objection could be made that such 'irrational' behaviour is itself evidence of rationality because its purpose is to promote in some way the survivability of the species, but Vico's sense of

²⁶⁷ NS 1101.

the rational was restricted to the kind of thought and behaviour that contributed to civil society, not mere animal survival. The defining activity of Vico's mind seems to be that of making continuous self-modifications in order to maintain and promote the human race. It is hard not to compare it, however reductive an impression that may leave, with a tool. If it is a 'mirror of nature' and accurately represents the world, then it does so in relation to its utility, not because its ability to faithfully reflect the nuances of nature has any intrinsic value. In keeping with William James's famous quip that "truth is what works", Vico seems to be saying that our 'truth' is tied into our beliefs, and that utility is the ultimate judge of veracity.

Knowing human nature

It is hard to know exactly what Vico meant by saying we could enter into the minds of others of different times and places,²⁶⁸ nonetheless it is unlikely that he intended that intuition was enough to satisfy a standard in scientific inquiry: the standard of objectivity would be established by observation of universal patterns of behaviour.²⁶⁹ Vico wanted to 'enter into' the minds of previous generations to understand their controlling myths, intended as their social norms and belief systems, but probably not with the expectation of discovering detailed particulars about a culture's material or ideologi-

²⁶⁸ See NS 331 and Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment: Vico, Hamann, Herder*, "Vico nowhere, so far as I know, fully or exactly explains the way in which men understand other men – 'know their minds', grasp their goals, outlooks, ways of thinking, feeling, acting. He does not account for our knowledge of other selves – individual or collective, living or dead – by invoking the language of empathy, or analogical reasoning, or intuition, or participation in the unity of the World Spirit. That has been left to his interpreters. He rests his case on his conviction that what men have made, other men, because their minds are those of men, can always, in principle, 'enter into'", 47.

²⁶⁹ See Joseph Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2003), "Having duly recognized the fact that because of this [mental] distance an immediate entry into their alien culture by purely intuitive and merely 'imaginative' means, is impossible, he sought to discover in their cultural performances certain moral codes, or 'principles' of behaviour, which are still understandable to us". 6-7.

cal artefacts. Here is a key concept of the *New Science* upon which Vico stakes so much of his claims for having achieved a 'science' of human history, the truth and certainty of which is attained by his method of philological reconstruction. There seem to be two main ways of making sense of this concept, which I shall call the 'strong' and the 'weak' versions; one is more speculative and the other more empirical. The strong version can be interpreted that we could experience the *very same* thought processes that our ancestors had by the exercise of *fantasia*. This admittedly metaphysical interpretation, which sometimes borders on the mystical, closely resembles the *Verstehen* and simulation theory traditions advanced by Wilhelm Dilthey, Max Weber, and R.G. Collingwood. In them, the imaginative skills and empathetic relationship of the philosopher of history for past societies are 'subjective' instruments as important to his research as the mastery of 'objective' tools like bibliographical detail and knowledge of the material culture. In this interpretation, Vico faces the same sort of indictment that Weber faced when his critics alleged that he "confuses what is simply a technique for framing hypotheses with the logical character of the evidence for such hypotheses".²⁷⁰ The other way of reading Vico's meaning is that he thought we could enter as far as the *antechamber* (and not the *salle d'honneur!*) of the past and intellectually assess the underlying social structures and principles of causal development of civilisations not our own, but not that we could *re-live* another period of history.²⁷¹ In this 'weaker' interpretation we would say that the 'mind' being entered into was a blueprint of another society's construction rather than

²⁷⁰ Peter Winch, *The Idea of a Social Science* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, Inc., 1990), 112.

²⁷¹ The metaphor could be extended to the point of conceiving of the movement into the mind of the past as a kind of Platonic cave in reverse. Instead of the deluded prisoners receiving enlightenment by looking *outside* the cave, we have in this case a situation whereby we receive enlightenment (of our origins) by looking back *into* the darkness of the 'abyss of time'. How much we will be able to see, and how much we can make sense of that, will depend to a large extent on the *fantasia*, or imagination, we possess and the plausibility of our interpretations based on facts.

an individual consciousness. Whatever interpretation is closer to the truth, it seems reasonable to suppose that, even though he was not a methodical theorist, Vico intended to claim a place for *fantasia*, or the imagination, alongside more traditional methods of historical analysis. While it would be a mistake to believe he was arguing that *fantasia* was superior to logical analysis as an historical tool, the importance he placed on it in the construction and *reconstruction* of thinking cannot be ignored. Vico's fervent insistence in planting the concept of imaginative reconstruction in knowledge seems to borrow freely of a Baroque aesthetic that requires the active imaginative participation of the interpreter in order to fully experience the meaning of the work. We will never overcome an anachronistic reading of history, Vico tells us, unless we employ *fantasia* to enter into the minds of the people who preceded us – for we must understand what purpose institutions served *for them*, not what purpose they would serve in a society like our own. *Fantasia* is aided by philology to ascertain the details of the ancient accounts and by philosophy to verify the conceptual coherence of the ideas which engendered the generation of institutions.

Vico's aim in reconciling philosophy and philology seems, at least in part, to have been an attempt to circumvent the kind of confrontation or dualism that obtains when particular and universal truths are kept apart in separate ontological realms:

Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain.²⁷²

This same axiom shows how the philosophers failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists, and likewise how the latter failed by half in not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasoning of

²⁷² NS 138.

the philosophers. If they had done this they would have been more useful to their commonwealths and they would have anticipated us in conceiving this Science.²⁷³

What was Vico's meaning of *scienza* and the co-terminus *coscienza*? For Vico, *scienza* was 'the true' (*il vero*), for it contains universal and eternal truths, and he associates it with philosophy. *Coscienza*, conversely, was 'the certain' (*il certo*), and it consists of facts and events that are confirmed by evidence; Vico associates it with philology. In Vico's epistemology, we can have true knowledge (*scienza*) of man's creations because we have made them, and thus know both their origin and how they were formed, but we can have only certain knowledge (*coscienza*) of the natural world because we have not made it, and we were not present at the Creation, so we lack knowledge of how it was formed. This, at any rate, is Vico's position, although it is by no means incontestable, for there are different traditions that both sustain and deny the knowability of the natural world. But, given this stance, how does it have, for Vico, a practical influence on the exercise of knowledge?

Vico believed that knowledge was a product of the social context in which it was formed. As a student of etymology, it almost certainly was not lost on him that the Latin word *conscientia* comes from 'cum' and 'scientia', or knowledge that can be shared with others. *Consciousness* retained this aspect of social wisdom until the Rationalists introduced the individual focus of knowledge, whereby one acquires and possesses it for oneself rather than building and sharing it collectively.²⁷⁴ For Vico, there is no privileged position, or view from nowhere, from which we can form opinions and judgments that are unaffected by the environment we live in. He would say that conceptual consciousness is

²⁷³ NS 140.

²⁷⁴ For an extended discussion of this subject, see Philippe Rochat, *Others in Mind: Social Origins of Self-Consciousness* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 50-51.

the product of social activity and does not exist apart from society.²⁷⁵ The concepts we create are products of the activities we engage in, which were themselves conceptualized from previous activities. In Vico's theory, knowledge is acquired through a creative process that involves physical activity, and is never 'passively' received, as in a contemplative experience. How different, on reflection, from the Platonic idea where the individual mind is 'illuminated' by independent eternal forms or ideas which are not in debt for their existence to the collective efforts of people in society.

Language and human nature

In the sixth oration on humanistic education that he gave at the University of Naples in 1707, Vico discusses how the corrupt nature of man may be made whole by the study of the liberal arts and sciences. Language which is inadequate to meet the needs of civilized humanity is one of the divine chastisements that man must suffer for the sin of Adam, and Vico says that the redress to this punishment is eloquence:

I have enumerated as the punishments for corrupted human nature the inadequacy of language, the opinions of the mind, and the passions of the soul. Therefore, the remedies are eloquence, knowledge, and virtue.²⁷⁶

Corrupted language contributes to the psychic fragmentation of man, but, Vico says, eloquence and rhetoric could bring clarity to our thinking and aid mankind to rebuild its identity:

²⁷⁵ For a similar view of the semantics of natural language, see Ray Jackendoff, *Language, Consciousness, Culture: Essays on Mental Structure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007) 364, where he says that social cognition is a product of concepts, as concepts are the products of social relationships.

²⁷⁶ Vico, *On Humanistic Education, Oration VI*, 129.

Finally he shows that the third age, that of common men and vernacular languages, coincides with the times of the ideas of a human nature completely developed and hence recognized as identical in all men.²⁷⁷

In the third age, Vico's age of men, the human race takes command of language, and by mastering this 'tool' it is enabled to consciously participate in the providential order and establish civil society:

Human language using words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are absolute lords, and which is proper to the popular commonwealths and monarchical states; a language whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound.²⁷⁸

Vico is saying that words gain their meaning through a communal process of agreement, not from individualistic ratiocination:

There is no discipline which needs reason so much less and memory so much more than language. In fact, language is based on the common agreement and usage of the people, "among whom there is the choice of the rules and norms of speech".²⁷⁹

His position is that the meaning of words and concepts cannot be reduced to a set of definitions and rules that remain fixed and unchangeable. On the contrary, he believed, as meaning holists do today, that the nature of reference is a social phenomenon whereby meanings are collectively constructed.²⁸⁰ Furthermore, as parts of a whole sys-

²⁷⁷ G.B. Vico, *Autobiography*, 171.

²⁷⁸ *NS* 3.

²⁷⁹ G.B. Vico, *Oration VI*, 135.

²⁸⁰ See Hilary Putnam, *Representation and Reality* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988): "Meaning holism also runs counter to the great tendency to stress *definition* as the means by which the meaning of words is to be explained or fixed, i.e. counter to that famous stumper "Define your terms!" It has this aspect (which is very much stressed by Quine) because a suggestion that at once emerges from holism is that most terms cannot be defined – or, at least, cannot be defined if by a "definition" one means something that is fixed once and for all, something that absolutely captures the meaning of the term". 9.

tem of meanings, the reference they possess exists only in relation to that system, just as the meaning or purpose of a bodily part only makes sense in relation to the body as a whole.²⁸¹ Without knowing the context in which a word is spoken, how is its meaning to be understood? The view that a word possesses a literal sense, intrinsic to it, supposes that historical factors play a negligible (or at least non-determinant) role in our interpretation of statements. Against this view, ahistorical and essentialist, Vico sought to reinvigorate the use of rhetoric in public discourse as a means whereby the articulation of concepts was approached with almost scientific precision. Although Vico nowhere directly states how political discourse should be controlled, in the same way that Plato in the *Republic* or Hobbes in the *Leviathan* outlined, the absence in his writings of an appeal to scientific or political authority would seem to indicate that in his judgment the beliefs upon which the civil state was maintained were best discovered by a communal process rather than by dictate or decree. The finding of 'truth' was an integral part of the exercise of power, and in the rhetorical tradition reason is formed from persuasion, and for reason to function there must be persuasive discourse.²⁸² When Aristotle says in *The Art of Rhetoric* that "the objective of rhetoric is judgment"²⁸³ it should arouse us to the importance it has in the very real dispensation of justice: it is not an innocuous self-serving histrionic technique. His opposition to language essentialism and his belief in

²⁸¹ In the same spirit, I would point out that there's no such thing as an 'accent' for speakers of the same community. The distinction arises only when contact is made with speakers from outside their community. The 'accent' only exists by virtue of the comparison; otherwise, there is nothing *essential* about it.

²⁸² The same notion is strikingly similar to the idea expressed by Foucault: "Truth" is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it." See *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977 Michel Foucault*, Colin Gordon (ed.), New York: Pantheon 1980, 133.

²⁸³ Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, trans. by H.C. Lawson-Tancred, London: Penguin Books, 2004, 140.

'meaning holism' is the cornerstone to his belief that rhetoric had an important part to play in the formation and interpretation of our epistemological concepts.²⁸⁴

If Vico's meaning holism applies to definitions and whole language systems, then it seems plausible that the principle would also extend to the political and philosophical concepts that belong to any given age. This is reflected in Vico's methodological postulate "Doctrines must take their beginning from that of the matters of which they treat".²⁸⁵ Accordingly, as Vico stresses throughout the *New Science*, the hermeneutic decipherment of a culture's thought and customs will take place primarily through a process of historical philology, and this is where he has earned the title of the father of historicism.²⁸⁶ But if the process of assigning meaning to words and other cultural artefacts properly resides in the community that makes them, it would be reasonable to question whether even though they might achieve a specificity they would otherwise lack if placed within a more cosmopolitan, but also more indefinite, cultural lexicon, without a particular local ethos to anchor those interpretations, there might also lie crouched in such a methodology a latent distrust of universal philosophical concepts in general. For in this case, the subject of philosophical reasoning becomes less a matter of the ontology of cosmopolitan constructions than the acute analysis of provincial customs and cul-

²⁸⁴ See Wittgenstein's famous discussion of meaning holism in *Philosophical Investigations*, Part 1, sections 1 to 36.

²⁸⁵ *NS* 314, also *NS* 238, "The order of ideas must follow the order of institutions". Compare this to Spinoza's axiom in *The Ethics*, Part II, Proposition VII, "The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things". As Battistini noted in his comments to the *Second New Science* (Mondadori, 3rd edition, 2001, pp. 1533-1534), Vico, unlike Spinoza, was not a pantheist and ideas for him did not mean for him modes of God's being, but rather man's. In the English translations the Italian "cose" (things) is usually rendered "institutions", thereby stressing the artefactual quality of human endeavour.

²⁸⁶ A definition might serve here, and I find Hacking's definition of historicism as good as any: "But what's historicism? Something like this: the theory that social and cultural phenomena are historically determined, and that each period in history has its own values that are not directly applicable to other epochs. In philosophy that implies that philosophical issues find their place, importance and definitions in a specific cultural milieu." – Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 52-53.

tures. Vico would have to address this issue to avoid triviality and narrowness in the *New Science*, and he did that by resorting to a defence of rhetoric as the logical means whereby a universal standard of thought and reasoning may be established among separate communities.

The role of rhetoric

The motto of the Royal Society of London (1660) is “Nullius in verba”, or “Take nobody’s word for it”. These words aptly sum up the new tide of intellectual inquiry that was sweeping the seventeenth century. Some of the prime targets of the new scientific movement were philosophical and ecclesiastical truth claims that were reasoned through figurative and intricate language. Rhetoric was a stock-in-trade for Scholastic philosophers and ecclesiastical bodies; for them, figurative speech and intricate language were as much a part of the process of argumentation for veridical confirmation as the results of empirical experiment would become for later ‘natural philosophers’ (scientists).²⁸⁷ But as the ‘Century of Genius’ progressed, hypotheses would increasingly be believed because they could be confirmed by empirical evidence, not because of eloquence and the power of persuasion. And if the presence of philosophy and rhetoric is all but absent in today’s scientific institutions that is not confirmation that behind the scientists’ experiments and instruments a multitude of philosophical positions and prejudices do not invisibly influence their research topics.²⁸⁸ Many rituals, in the broad-

²⁸⁷ See, for instance, S. Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994). In this work, Shapin draws attention to the influence that social conventions and norms had in shaping the body of admissible evidence.

²⁸⁸ See Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984). Vico’s position that rhetoric is crucial in finding the subject matter of research, as well as the effective presentation of its findings, seems to resonate in this statement by Goodman: “Any notion of a reality consisting of objects and events and kinds established independently of discourse and unaffected by how they are described or otherwise presented must give way to the recognition that these, too, are parts of the

est sense of the term, have a basis in both science and superstition, and the 'relics', or instruments, associated with them represent the fusion of a material and an ideal, or spiritual, dimension. However, not for this is their power or significance *weakened*, rather it is because they incorporate these separate ontological domains that they exercise the force that they do.

What was Vico's position on rhetoric's power to control words? First, it helps to disabuse the question of anachronistic notions of science and art, in which there is supposedly a golden standard of complete objectivity for science and a license to interpret nature in any way for art.²⁸⁹ For Vico, the use of rhetoric was not an end in itself while the attainment of truth was secondary; rather, rhetoric had an essential part to play in scientific thought, because as thinking is dependent on words so does the arrangement and tenor of those words determine the representation of the idea to be expressed. This is not to claim that language and thought are one and the same, although they might be, but it is to say that, Vico believed, without articulated language structures thought cannot achieve the same degree of precision and nuance that it could otherwise have. Would it not have been strange if Vico, the professor of rhetoric, had *not* taken on a strident defence of the epistemological value of rhetoric?²⁹⁰ Would it not have been inconsistent for him to vitiate the epistemological role of rhetoric when he was professionally tied to it and a successor to the Italian Humanist tradition that relied so heavily on it? In

story. If we dismiss measures of referential distance as not matters of fact because they are discourse dependent, we shall have trouble finding features that *are* matters of fact". 67.

²⁸⁹ This characterisation is, admittedly, parochial or 'Victorian', nevertheless, in large measure, I think it reflects common notions of what can or should be expected of 'science' and what domains are open to 'art'.

²⁹⁰ See Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's 'New Science.'* (New York: Cambridge University Press): "As a professed rhetorician Vico was more qualified than others to know that it was not enough to think differently about human affairs; one had to find alternative patterns of discourse, to invent better analogies and more adequate vocabularies with which to convey the new insights". 66.

that tradition, facts and values did not belong to exclusive domains of the human experience, but were two parts of the same process that led to the discovery of truth.

But does this mean that for Vico the *style* of discourse was equivalent to the *content* of the meaning? Were the *forms thought of* and the *forms of thought* (pace Goodman) roughly equivalent? Was Vico insisting that rhetoric was a *relative* cultural product or a *universal* form of communication? He said that rhetoric allows the discovery of new subjects through methodical “orderings of thought”: it permitted not just a rearrangement of previous known subjects of study, but created new fields of inquiry through the judicious manipulation of topics:

Providence gave good guidance to human affairs when it aroused human minds first to topics rather than to criticism, for acquaintance with things must come before judgment of them. Topics has the function of making minds inventive, as criticism has that of making them exact. ... Thus the first peoples, who were the children of the human race, founded first the world of the arts; then the philosophers, who came a long time afterward and so may be regarded as the old men of the nations, founded the world of the sciences, thereby making humanity complete.²⁹¹

Rhetoric had the power not only to articulate and adjudicate terms of reference, but also to create the methodology and topics of discourse. For Vico, rhetoric was not simply a means of obtaining agreement in society when universal standards were lacking, instead it was fundamentally the means by which we *acquired* truth through investigating diverse points of view, weighing evidence, and judging probabilities:

For one can not form a sound judgment of a thing without having complete knowledge of it; and topics is the art of finding in anything all that is in it.²⁹²

²⁹¹ NS 498.

²⁹² Vico, *Autobiography*, 124.

Even if it were possible to fix and codify scientific findings, bereft of all rhetorical illustration, as if they were elements unsusceptible to change, they would still have to be reported to and discussed among other scientists. And in order to convince them of her findings, a scientist needs more of language than just facts.²⁹³ Rhetorical technique can clarify those findings so that the interlocutors share a common point of view and have a precise means to discuss their observations.²⁹⁴ Without the level of articulation that is possible when using the full range of rhetorical tropes, many of a scientist's findings would otherwise remain undeciphered clues waiting for a voice to express them.

Vico believed that the loss of rhetoric in public life threatened not only our political acumen but the art of reasoning itself: he feared that the body of common topics was becoming increasingly narrow and the subjects of scientific discourse were becoming opaque and inaccessible to the average 'educated' person. With the estrangement from familiar concepts, he feared that a lack of social grounding would begin to characterize the public psyche in the later half of the age of men. This is what he called the "barbarism of reflection". A society that has lost its common frame of reference cannot main-

²⁹³ The same idea is basic to hermeneutic methodologies. See H-G Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, 2nd revised edition [1960], trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2000).: "Since the romantic period we can no longer hold the view that, in the absence of immediate understanding, interpretive ideas are drawn, as needed, out of a linguistic storeroom where they are lying ready. Rather, language is the universal medium in which understanding occurs. Understanding occurs in interpreting. This statement does not mean that there is no special problem of expression... the fact is that the problems of verbal expression are themselves problems of understanding. All understanding is interpretation, and all interpretation takes place in the medium of a language that allows the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language. ... The essential relation between language and understanding is seen primarily in the fact that the essence of tradition is to exist in the medium of language, so that the preferred *object* of interpretation is a verbal one". 388-389.

²⁹⁴ See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, 2e (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): "Probability requires probity and approbation but for demonstration we must be able to see and show what is what. The primary sense of the word *probabilitas* is not evidential support but support from respected people". 22-23.

tain its cohesion. Vico believed that our understanding of the world is gained by how we talk about it, and if we do not hold that discussion then all we can hope for is a factual description of its parts, but not an interpretation, which supplies a *meaning* to those things. That was where the fight was between him and Cartesian rationalism, and that will be discussed, among other things, in the next chapter.

A deep solitude of spirit and will

This chapter will examine the end of Vico's third course in the *ideal eternal history*, the age of men, which is distinctly human by virtue of its rationality. The focus will be on Vico's definition of philosophical knowledge, which he considered the acme of reasoning, and his fight with rationalism, which he thought threatened that knowledge because it limited the scope of what could be considered 'knowledge'. Lastly, I will discuss the degeneracy and loss of rational thinking, a process Vico called the *barbarism of reflection*, and question why Vico thought that the knowledge contained in the *New Science* was not enough to save mankind from a return to barbarism.

Philosophers: The old men of the nations

At this time, we are in a place very far from the caves and first beastly men that Vico described at the beginning of his history. The human journey in the *New Science* is measured not only in years from the great Flood but also in the distance traversed in mankind's mental development. We have seen the unthinking reactions of the *bestioni* transformed into virtuous behaviour and articulate concepts, and it is well to remember that in Vico's philosophic-poetic narrative mankind never enjoyed the peace and comfort of a pastoral world, a golden age, of the kind that is commonly found in world histories before him. For Vico, the achievement of rationality was an arduous affair from the start, and man's ascent in history is not assured by the direct intervention of a personal creator, as in the Abrahamic religions, but is mainly his own achievement:

Thus the first peoples, who were the children of the human race, founded first the world of the arts; then the philosophers, who came a long time afterward and so may be regarded as the old men of the nations, founded the world of the sciences, thereby making humanity complete.²⁹⁵

Nevertheless, Vico does not attribute the acquisition of civilisation solely to human effort, but says the foundation of social behaviour is providential design:²⁹⁶

In providing for this property [being social] God so ordained and disposed human institutions that men, having fallen from complete justice by original sin, and while intending almost always to do something quite different and often quite the contrary – so that for private utility they would live alone like wild beasts – have been led by this same utility and along the aforesaid different and contrary paths to live like men in justice and to keep themselves in society and thus to observe their social nature.²⁹⁷

The “old men of the nations”, the philosophers, represent the acme of reasoning. How can the nature of their knowledge be defined? Vico says that wisdom is always grounded in natural utility:

²⁹⁵ NS 498.

²⁹⁶ The concept of *conatus* is unavoidable in any discussion of Vico’s account of human nature. His first treatment of the concept is in the *De Antiquissima* (On the most ancient wisdom of the Italians, 1710), it is absent in the first *New Science* and reintroduced in the third *New Science*. It is by no means one of the easiest Vichian concepts to grasp, but, in essence, Vico’s final position in the third *New Science* seems to be that *conatus* is a force in man, separate from nature and of divine origin, which assures free will. How this relates to providence is neatly summarized by Robertson (John Robertson, *The Case for the Enlightenment: Scotland and Naples 1680-1760* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005): “The *conato* activated by the frightful thought of a divinity cannot, however, be effective without assistance. Corrupt as men’s nature is, tyrannized by *amor proprio*, men follow principally their own utility (*la propria utilità*), and are unable by themselves to impose *conato* on the passions. Therefore it must be by divine providence that men are checked sufficiently to accept the institutions of family, civil society, and finally human society as a whole. Which shows that what regulates all justice among men is divine justice, which is administered by divine providence to preserve human society (NS 341). In suppressing and transforming the bestial passions into human ones, in other words, the *conato* of human free will must be assisted by divine providence. The point is reinforced by Vico’s subsequent observation that divine providence acts without human involvement or counsel, and often against the designs of men (NS 342). Divine providence is neither Epicurean accident nor Stoic fate: it is above and beyond the reach of human intention, but acts with the *conato* of the will to check men’s selfish passions, and direct them to sociable ends”. 244-5.

²⁹⁷ NS 2.

The natural equity of fully developed human reason is a practice of wisdom in affairs of utility, since wisdom in its broad sense is nothing but the science of making use of things as their nature dictates.²⁹⁸

Although Vico insists utility is the basis for wisdom, the knowledge that is required for proper deliberation in civil wars is formed from a synthesis of esoteric and practical reasoning. For him, Plato and Tacitus individually represent models of those different types that the wise man must combine in himself to be complete:

[For] with an incomparable metaphysical mind Tacitus contemplates man as he is, Plato as he should be. And as Plato with his universal knowledge explores the parts of nobility which constitute the man of intellectual wisdom, so Tacitus descends into all the counsels of utility whereby, among the infinite irregular chances of malice and fortune, the man of practical wisdom brings things to good issue. Now Vico's²⁹⁹ admiration of these two great authors from this point of view was a foreshadowing of that plan on which he later worked out an ideal eternal history to be traversed by the universal history of all times, carrying out on it, by certain eternal properties of civil affairs, the development, acme and decay of all nations. *From this it follows that the wise man should be formed both of esoteric wisdom such as Plato's and of common wisdom such as that of Tacitus* [my italics].³⁰⁰

The importance, for Vico, of combining the two types of knowledge – the universal (or esoteric) and the particular (or common sense) – is that the common good will not suffer individual interests, and vice versa:

Plato, reflecting that in such public assemblies the minds of particular men, each passionately bent on his private utility, are brought together in a dispassionate idea of common utility (according to the saying that men individually are swayed by their private interests but collectively they seek justice), raised himself to the meditation of the highest intelligible ideas of cre-

²⁹⁸ NS 326.

²⁹⁹ Again, the reader is reminded that Vico referred to himself in the third person in his autobiography.

³⁰⁰ Vico, *Autobiography*, 138-139.

ated minds, ideas which are distinct from these created minds and can reside only in God, and thus he reached the height of conceiving the philosophical hero who commands his passions at will.³⁰¹

The philosopher's wisdom consists of understanding the concepts that are manifested through the *ideal eternal history* (not surprisingly, the same role Vico assigned to himself in writing the *New Science*), which though guided by providence is a human creation. In this way they serve mankind by helping it to achieve its potential:

But because of the corruption of human nature, the generic character of men cannot without the help of philosophy (which can aid but few) bring it about that every individual's mind should command and not serve his body. Therefore divine providence ordered human institutions with this eternal order: that, in commonwealths, those who use their minds should command and those who use their bodies should obey.³⁰²

Thus, Vico's philosopher is not a detached pedant, but is fully engaged in the institutions upon which commonwealths depend. As one who has learned to control the passions and exercise reason, she provides a model of personal liberation from the tyranny of the senses which sets an example of emancipation to the people collectively:

The people had finally come to understand that the rational nature (which is the true human nature) is equal in all men. From this natural equality (by occasions conceived in the ideal eternal history and encountered exactly in Roman history) they gradually brought the heroes to civil equality in popular commonwealths.³⁰³

Vico was not necessarily a precursor of later secular explicators of history, like David Hume who in *The History of England* interpreted English history as one of steady

³⁰¹ NS 1041.

³⁰² NS 18.

³⁰³ NS 29.

progress toward freedom from authoritarian structures,³⁰⁴ for Vico's schema was less rigid in many ways than those paradigms of universal history which were to follow him, but he did believe, in a broad sense, that history had a direction that proceeded from human bondage to emancipation, and in his narrative the philosopher was chiefly responsible for this process.³⁰⁵ Vico continued to speak of "the corruption of human nature" in rather the same way that theologians had for centuries before him, but his analysis of human nature becomes in large part a question of the role that institutions play in forming human character. While he rejected any type of determinism, whether it was Stoicism's cosmic necessity or mechanistic physics's inevitability, ostensibly because it violated the Catholic doctrine of free will, he must have certainly realised that human freedom was being challenged by ascribing human nature to institutions and not the individual person. One might say, however, that in so far as institutions are human products they are extensions of us, and presumably under our control. Just as our interpretation of natural history changes with the tools employed to observe it, so too does the content of social history reflect the institutions in place from which we observe ourselves. New instruments increase the scientist's vision of natural history, and advanced institutions expand Vico's philosopher's understanding of human nature. But institutions have the peculiarity of functioning simultaneously as both instruments operated by humans and as agents that operate on humans: we create them and are created by them. When institutions collapse, so do individuals, because without their support individuality ceases to exist and it is replaced by brute endeavour.

³⁰⁴ The same is true of Condorcet, Turgot, the Enlightenment in general and later Comte.

³⁰⁵ With the qualification, of course, that this movement is characteristic of a cycle of ages, and does not reflect the totality of the *ideal eternal history*, which does not culminate at any given point in time but is repeated endlessly.

The quarrel with rationalism

In the seventeenth century the use of mechanical metaphors for government became more common. Famously, Thomas Hobbes uses them to describe the function of the state.³⁰⁶ Today, almost unthinkingly, we refer to 'state machinery', which expresses our reliance on technology not only to manage the state but also to use technological models to understand the governing of a state.³⁰⁷ Our use of the metaphor is due to the fact that with the use of mechanical, and later electronic, computing devices the precision of computational machines became the standard for the human worker: work is judged by comparison to the predictability and reliability of automation. But in the early stages of the foundation of a civil society what is required is a high level of interpersonal communication and decision by public consensus; for example, we can easily imagine a great deal of discussion and debate going into the building of town walls and the clearing and planting of fields. Later, once those foundational activities have been accomplished, the society then has greater need of the technical, or scientific, knowledge that can be employed to secure and maintain what has been made. To extend the example of town building might be useful, for after the walls are put up locks are needed to secure them. In traditional cultures locks are usually made by the blacksmith. His specialised knowledge of metallurgy and mechanics permits a society to defend its secrets and valuables. Although this professional skill ensures a new element of safety to the community, it also exacerbates a political tension between those who can access the sources of a state's power, and thereby share in it, and those denied entry by virtue of their technical or general illiteracy. Vico says that in the human age rationality is finally

³⁰⁶ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651.

³⁰⁷ Some of the ideas here I owe to a reading of Jon Agar's, *The Government Machine: A Revolutionary history of the computer* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004).

achieved by a plurality of political subjects, due largely through their emancipation from the nobles, who until now have been able to restrict their access to the knowledge they possessed, or claimed to possess.³⁰⁸ And when those who have experienced the empowerment of reason are then cut off from it, through political oppression or social fragmentation, then, Vico says, a process of individual and social disintegration begins:

Because basic human nature has been changed by original sin, assemblies of men may appear to be societies, but the truth is that isolation of spirits is greatest where many bodies come together. Even more is it like the crowded inmates of a prison where the spirits that I have mentioned above endure punishments, each in the cell to which it is assigned.³⁰⁹

It is this physical and psychic isolation of individuals which Vico believed would ultimately unravel a state and its institutions, and which prompted him to challenge the means to reason which he saw in rationalism.³¹⁰

The new modes of scientific inquiry were primarily based on a mathematical and deductive schema of problem solving, in contrast to the humanistic process of resolving social issues through public deliberation. As science advanced, more and more discoveries were made that seemed to fly in the face of common sense and which necessitated explanatory theories that would strike the average person as improbable. Vico was not

³⁰⁸ One achievement of the *New Science*, which to my knowledge is rarely mentioned, is that by presenting history as a logical process it undermines the legitimacy of 'secret histories' of the world, which authoritarian institutions employed to keep the people in a state of mystification and powerlessness.

³⁰⁹ Vico, *Oration VI*, 129.

³¹⁰ The contemporary social epistemology research programme shares many of these same concerns with the disenfranchisement of language and society. See *Philosophy, Rhetoric, and the End of Knowledge*, Steve Fuller & James H. Collier (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004): "Social epistemology's relevance to rhetoric and argumentation lies in its stress on the integral role that communication, both its facilitation and impedance, plays in contemporary thinking... Free access to the communicative process breeds increased accountability, which in turn forces aspiring authorities to couch their claims to knowledge in terms that can be understood by the largest number of people. By levelling terminology, we convey the idea that we all live in the same world. Any apparent differences in the access we have to that world are attributed to epistemic artifice – "ideology," if you will – which typically masquerade as ontological differences or "incommensurable worlds." These world differences restrict the number of eligible critics of one's claims to the class of people known as "experts" or "natives". 22.

insensitive to science as a means to truth, but he feared that reducing inquiry, whether scientific or social, to a self-contained system of premise and deduction would exclude other human considerations that could not be neatly evaluated in this logic. In order to arrive at the 'clear and distinct' ideas that obtained from deductive logic, the rationalists needed to clear a way through the often dense forest of seventeenth-century rhetoric that characterised not just political but also technical or scientific thinking. But knowingly or not, in this process they were destroying a whole system of shared human meanings that represented knowledge chains many generations long.³¹¹ In the pursuit of technocratic organization, a new model of man would result, one that keeps character with Max Weber's definition of modernity: rationalization, bureaucratization and the disenchantment of the world.³¹² Vico, like social epistemologists today, rejected this logic in favour of one that made philosophy and science a 'social practice' with comparative truth values. In simple terms, it recognises that the world is not just black and white, and that 'intermediate values' also have a place in truth, especially in social contexts where it is not uncommonly futile to demand absolute values of true or false. This is not to say, however, that social enquiry requires many-valued logic, but it does reflect Vico's

³¹¹ Wilfrid Sellars points out in '*Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man*', in *Metaphysics: Classic and Contemporary Readings*, eds. Ronald C. Hoy & L. Nathan Oaklander (Belmont, CA: Thomson Wadsworth, 2005): "The Platonic theory of conceptual abilities as the result of the 'illumination' of the mind by intelligible essences limited the role of the group and, in particular, the family to that of calling these abilities into play – a role which could, in principle, be performed by perceptual experience – and to that of teaching the means of giving verbal expression to these abilities. Yet the essential social character of conceptual thinking comes clearly to mind when we recognize that there is no thinking apart from common standards of correctness and relevance, which relate what *I do* think to what *anyone ought* to think. The contrast between '*I*' and '*anyone*' is essential to rational thought". 612-613.

³¹² This is reflected in a comment by D.P. Verene: "Once the humanist ideal of self-knowledge is given up, there can be no real pursuit of moral philosophy. Ethics becomes either *metaethics*, that is, a theoretical enterprise, or applied, that is, reduced to discussion of special problems for particular areas of society... Language becomes impoverished because, when right reasoning requires only the clarity of method, we no longer need to use language to speak about what can barely be expressed – what is beyond language and indefinite in human experience – things human and divine. We no longer need to use language to bring out the ambiguous meanings of words and things". From the Introduction to Vico's, *On Humanistic Education* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 10-11.

openness to admit other considerations than the quantifiable in his ontology of values, such as preferences and beliefs, for he believed that they affect not only the means of rational judgement but also determine the subject matter of rational consideration.

The passions and reason

For Vico, passions³¹³ are less an impediment to reason than they are a source for much of our rational calculations, and, as such, he believed that non-rational factors such as preferences and emotions play a very strong role in forming perceptions and making decisions.³¹⁴ This is not to say that he was endorsing ‘irrational’ thinking; rather, it appears that he acknowledged that the passions must be included in any rational assessment and should not be dismissed as untidy and non-essential elements that are baneful to proper deliberation.³¹⁵ Vico was quite willing to accept the role of the analytical mind as long as that did not exclude a place for the ‘emotive’ mind in our reasoning. Whereas the rationalists thought that the passions kept mankind a prisoner to error, Vico held them close as allies in the struggle to free us from the illusion of absolute certainty. As well as including the passions in rational deliberation and assessment, Vico recognized

³¹³ ‘Passions’ is employed here to do double duty for ‘feelings’ and ‘emotions’, where there is no need to emphasize the philosophical distinction between the terms, in order to simplify the notion of non-intellectual influences on reasoning.

³¹⁴ In Frank P. Ramsey’s classic paper ‘*Truth and Probability*’ (1926), *Philosophical Papers*, D.H. Mellor, ed., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), his discussion of the ‘logic of partial belief’ draws conclusions similar to Vico’s (which I find interesting and pertinent here, as they seem to confirm the relevance of Vico’s thoughts on logic) about how irrational values may vitiate rational decisions: “In order therefore to construct a theory of quantities of belief which shall be both general and more exact, I propose to take as a basis a general psychological theory, which is now universally discarded, but nevertheless comes, I think, fairly close to the truth in the sort of cases with which we are most concerned. I mean the theory that we act in the way we think most likely to realize the objects of our desires, so that a person’s actions are completely determined by his desires and opinions. This theory cannot be made adequate to all the facts, but it seems to me a useful approximation to the truth particularly in the case of our self-conscious or professional life, and it is presupposed in a great deal of our thought”. 69.

³¹⁵ The same belief that passions, or emotions, play an integral part in our reasoning has been forcibly argued by the neuroscientist and philosopher, Antonio Damasio – particularly in his book, *Descartes’ Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: Putnam Publishing, 1994).

that the acquisition of knowledge is not a passive activity that is somehow uninfluenced by the environment in which it occurs; his views on this subject compare closely to a constructivist approach whereby knowledge is seen as a process that takes place between the thinking subject and the experiential world. The dream or idea of a dedicated rationalist that theoretical contemplation could equate to knowledge would have been utterly alien and repugnant to everything Vico thought about human rationality. This reduced state of man, in which he lives for and through a mental life which is separated from his passions, Vico calls the *barbarism of reflection*. In the state of this new barbarism the passions count for nothing and only 'pure reason' possesses value.³¹⁶ The pernicious effects of alienating reason from the passions for the sake of pure 'rational' expediency can be readily observed in much of the lifeless architecture, shoddy goods, and mindless bureaucratization that have crept into the world as a result of it.

To be sure, Vico challenged rationalism, not rationality. For Vico, conceptual thinking was, by its very nature, a social activity, for concepts are themselves social constructions. And it can only be maintained by and through the proper deliberation of realistic possibilities, within the context of existing institutions; in other words, it cannot exist in a vacuum, or a vat for that matter.³¹⁷ By extension, I take that to mean that it would be highly improbable to expect the same standard of rationality to apply to disparate

³¹⁶ Mali offers a relevant comment to this same point of Vico's attitude toward epistemology: "This *ergetic* or, as we would nowadays call it, 'constructivist' conception of knowledge has been often employed by the proponents of the *vita active* in their polemics against the ideal of *vita contemplative*, because it depicts knowledge as a creative, not merely a receptive, appropriation of the world". Mali 61.

³¹⁷ Vico's strident anti-rationalism might possibly have been sparked by his reading of Descartes' *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in which the French philosopher famously hypothesises that his perceptions might in reality be controlled by an 'evil demon', and that this possibility alone should prevent him from trusting any source of knowledge other than his own 'clear and distinct' ideas. However, I know of no specific reference to the *Meditations* in Vico, but it would be interesting to try to find one, for there could hardly be more diametrically opposed viewpoints on the access and acquisition to true knowledge.

peoples in different ages and circumstances.³¹⁸ Does this mean, then, that Vico thought there are inherent limits to human reasoning, restricted to local knowledge? I do not think so, but it does seem that Vico is making a distinction between mind and consciousness, objective and subjective awareness, and that he wanted to show the unbroken continuity of the mind from its sensory foundations in the passions to full-blown reason; seen in this way, his was a fight to maintain an invited place for the indefinite and probable at the table of knowledge, and by that to acknowledge the fundamental social nature of conceptual thinking.

Topics and the forms of reason

The way to defend the grounds of subjective reasoning was through maintaining the logical spaces created by the *ars topica* from the exclusive attention given by the Rationalists to the *ars critica*:

Providence gave good guidance to human affairs when it aroused human minds first to topics rather than to criticism, for acquaintance with things must come before judgment of them. Topics has the function of making minds inventive, as criticism has that of making them exact.³¹⁹

The subject of topics for Vico was hardly a quaint holdover from the salad days of rhetoric, for he saw in it a system of categories by which the validity of logical inferences could be judged. In his reasoning, all categories that are open to debate form a conceptual scheme by which other facts will be evaluated.³²⁰ As the choice of topics, or the

³¹⁸ Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws* also emphasises the 'biosemantic' (to borrow a term from Millikan) basis of institutions when he says that regimes could be distinguished in terms of which passions were dominant – fear, virtue or honour. This division coincides fairly neatly with Vico's own ages of gods, heroes, and men, respectively.

³¹⁹ *NS* 498.

³²⁰ See Donald Davidson, 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme', in *The Essential Davidson* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), for a contemporary view on how the categories and concepts we form (and accept or reject) are related to the "desires, habits, and dispositions of the agent". 197.

'categories', one allows for adjudication will determine the outcome of an inference, Vico was making the case that our understanding of a reality composed of things and experiences will be largely determined by the way they are described and by whom they are recognized.³²¹ Rather than viewing this as an endorsement of epistemological relativism, it might more accurately be seen as an acknowledgement that many rules or so-called objective positions that have been included into formalized systems of thought first began as instinctive or emotional behaviour, passions as it were, which was later modified by other social influences that permitted their inclusion into larger conceptual schemes.

The great danger to knowledge, as Vico saw it, was that in ignoring the ways and means of discourse we lose a thorough understanding of how we have come to accept certain matters as fact and others as mere conjecture. The landscape of topics that forms our field of vision will either permit or deny access to our reason, and from that it follows that the interpretation of matters of fact will depend on a subjective frame of reference. The purpose of topics is not to compartmentalize knowledge into isolated boxes, but to organize the subjects of inquiry into families, and by that to better see their interconnectivity as parts of life as a whole.³²² Vico does not doubt the universality of truth, and he confirms this belief by the imaginative and intellectual universals which he offers as evidence of a single human mind that shares the same ideas and concepts that tran-

³²¹ See Ian Hacking, *The Emergence of Probability: A Philosophical Study of Early Ideas about Probability, Induction and Statistical Inference*, 2e (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006): "Probability requires probity and approbation but for demonstration we must be able to see and show what is what. The primary sense of the word *probabilitas* is not evidential support but support from respected people". 22-23.

³²² See Nelson Goodman, *Of Mind and Other Matters* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984): "Validity of inductive inference, though a property of a relation among statements, requires truth neither of premises nor of conclusion; a valid inductive argument may even yield a false conclusion from true premises. What, then, is required for inductive validity? Certain formal relationships among the sentences in question *plus* what I shall call right categorization. Now a category or system of categories – a way of sorting – is not sentential, is not true or false; but use of wrong categories will make an induction invalid no matter how true the conclusion". 37

scends particular cultures and ages. But, at the same time, he does recognize the great degree to which truth is accepted, rejected and influenced by the topics chosen to discuss it. There is an unmistakable connection here with the importance Vico places elsewhere on the role of *fantasia* as an integral ingredient in the formation of concepts, because both the active use of the imagination and the choice of topics involve memory and stand in direct contrast to the increasingly rigid norms of speech which began in the seventeenth century.³²³ In effect, he is saying that, when the imagination is active, the world cannot be described by reference to the five senses alone, and that to speak of absolute objectivity through them is simply 'unrealistic' when applied to human affairs.

Vico's middle way

Vico's approach to the acquisition of knowledge was similar to that of Bacon's in that he (as Paolo Rossi wrote of the latter) attempted to unite the empirical and the rational or philosophical, and thus "open a middle way between experience and theorizing", the "via media inter experientiam et dogmata":³²⁴

Propositions XV [I]-XXII will give us the foundations of the certain. By their use we shall be able to see in fact this world of nations which we have studied in idea, following the best ascertained method of philosophizing, that of Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, but carrying it over from the institutions of nature, on which he composed his book *Cogitata [et] visa*, to the civil institutions of mankind.³²⁵

³²³ See I.A. Richards, 'Lecture III - The Interanimation of Words', in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965) 47-66. In this lecture, Richards discusses how the loss of rhetorical tropes leads to an impoverishment of language and the powers of conceptualisation.

³²⁴ Paolo Rossi, 'Bacon's idea of science', in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon*, ed. Markku Peltonen (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 25-46.

³²⁵ NS 163.

To arrive at the certain, Vico believed, depended largely on the precision of the terms we use to express our ideas. His complaint was that a lack of clarity in expression would obscure the ideas generated from empirical discovery. His argument was not against the universality of empirical knowledge, but rather the overly-confident assumption that findings are not affected by the means with which they are communicated. Vico thought that science could be impartial, but he took issue with the principle that ideas and concepts could remain invariable across time and space.³²⁶ For this reason, Vico was wary of any attempt that sought to isolate meaning and interpretation from the social and historical context in which it was found.³²⁷

Vico believed, in keeping with his *verum-factum* epistemological principle, that when the object of scientific inquiry was the natural world our knowledge of it was fundamentally limited, or as he called it 'certain' (*il certo*). This is because, he believed, as man was not the author of being in nature he would never know the secrets of its ontology. But when the subject of inquiry was the human world, the 'world of nations', he believed we could have 'true' (*il vero*), absolute or universal, knowledge, because as its authors we could understand its origins through the imagination, which is a uniquely human faculty. Vico uses the principle of the *verum-factum* to give logical justification for the psychological method of imaginative inquiry into human affairs, for as a method of inquiry, it relies on the accuracy of the hermeneutical exercise

³²⁶ See Richard Rorty, *Philosophy as Cultural Politics: Philosophical Papers* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007): "The analogy [in holism] with fitting together pieces of a puzzle is entirely appropriate for many areas of inquiry – for example, palaeontology, particle physics, and epigraphy. These are all areas of culture in which there is enough consensus to give a use to the notion of "getting it right." The idea that philosophy can become such an area by being put on the secure path of a science remains plausible only as long as concepts and meanings are seen as isolable from social practices and from history. For only if such isolation were possible would we be able to identify atoms of thought or of language whose relations with one another would remain constant no matter what use is made of them, in the way that the relations between bits of hardware remain constant no matter what programme is being run". 181-182

³²⁷ Quine says of the "myth of meaning" that it is as if there was a "gallery of ideas", from which "each idea were tagged with the expression that means it". See W.V. Quine, *Philosophy of Logic* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986) 8.

that measures historical meanings of ideas and concepts against present day knowledge. This method stands against the Cartesian model that would make of language something as fixed and transparent as mathematics, while Vico argued that language is only as clear as the collective associative meanings of words. For this reason, Vico was sceptical of rationalist claims to objective truth when they were based uniquely on the subjective certainty of one's own thought, without confirmation from the community at large.³²⁸

But Vico's position was not limited to his rejection of the Cartesian 'clear and distinct' ideas, for in his repudiation of the dogmatism of Cartesian epistemology that assigns truth values to only the entirely true or false, Vico's partial truth values enable man to participate in the making of history as a continuously created *social* construct, rather than as a *self-centred* knower of private knowledge. It might be objected that in focusing on the *social* ontology of thinking the individual is in some way diminished, or at least genius is not recognised as a solitary activity. If true, the individual ego undeniably suffers a loss, but at the same time the social thinker may not fall prey to the solipsism that can result from dismissing the cogency of the senses, which are exercised in common with others, and depending on a Cartesian 'theatre of the mind' for one's existential security.³²⁹

For Vico, the mind is a process, not a static thing, unlike the Cartesian *res cogitans* which, in theory at least, remains constant whatever the external circumstances. In Vico, self knowledge is arrived at by memory and imagination, which are active and par-

³²⁸ For an extended discussion of the incommensurability between subjective certainty and objective truth, see Ruth Millikan, *Language, Thought, and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1984) 312-313.

³²⁹ The psychological price of this position does not come cheap; as Varela wrote: "By treating mind and world as opposed subjective and objective poles, the Cartesian anxiety oscillates endlessly between the two in search of a ground". See Francisco J. Varela, Evan Thompson, Eleanor Rosch, *The Embodied Mind: Cognitive science and human experience* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1993) 141.

ticipate in the world, and not the product of detached reflection. By some standards of objectivity, this foundation for knowledge might look weak, as it implies that what we know of ourselves always depends upon the state of the institutions in which we are placed. It might be argued, then, that Vico is inadvertently making the case that there are inherent limits to human reasoning, as it is relative to contingent circumstances, while at the same time professing to have found a universal model of reasoning that is complete in its description of the human mind. For how could it know itself if it is in a perpetual state of flux? The solution that Vico gives to this problem is that all changes occur within the known, repeatable pattern of the *ideal eternal history*, which gives a permanent frame of reference to the order of our thoughts.³³⁰ Nevertheless, though in principle it is not hard to understand how Vico could have rejected a model of the mind as a mechanical apparatus that operates according to physical laws, it is more difficult to see why he believed we could truly know the mind while at the same time its ontology depends so heavily on the physical world that he believes would never reveal its secrets to man (again, in conformity with the *verum-factum* principle, that says only God can know His own creation). But the mind of man is also a product of intrinsic natural processes and, as such, it can be inferred that something of it must remain hidden to us. These two claims do not appear to be reconcilable.

The barbarism of reflection

Vico tells us that when language, which contains the collective memory of a race, loses its transformative power to heal social divisions and impart new conceptual models for society, the root of thought itself is damaged. A new emptiness settles in public

³³⁰ Something like a variation of the unmoved mover should come to mind.

spaces where civic life was once lived. Humanity suffers a new return to the caves, in a manner of speaking, as the individual psyche is now focused inward and public space becomes increasingly uncivil.

For such peoples, like so many beasts, have fallen into the custom of each man thinking only of his own private interests and have reached the extreme of delicacy, or better of pride, in which like wild animals they bristle and lash out at the slightest displeasure. Thus no matter how great the throng and press of their bodies, they live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will, scarcely any two being able to agree since each follows his own pleasure or caprice. By reason of all this, providence decrees that, through obstinate factions and desperate civil wars, they shall turn their cities into forests and the forests into dens and lairs of men. In this way, through long centuries of barbarism, rust will consume the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned them into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense.³³¹

The *barbarism of reflection*, or solipsism, that Vico names is the disjunction of thought from action. The 'conversation' that characterizes, and is essential to, a healthy society becomes a series of 'pronouncements' that are rigid and colourless, and focused on technical precision; specialised language becomes a means of entry into circles of power that are formed around specialised subjects. The voice of the educated generalist is drowned out by the clamour of overly-confident 'experts' whose pronouncements serve their own ends. This leads to a state of social paralysis which, in the Vichian scenario, bereft of the regenerating power of imagination, ends in the atrophy of language and leads to social fragmentation. The polarization of society entails the loss of knowledge, as well as the sundering of the social contract. In opposition to the *barbarism of reflection* stands Vico's *sensus communis*, or common sense:

³³¹ NS 1106.

Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes.

Common sense is judgment without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, or the entire human race.³³²

For Vico, common sense is indispensable to society, for without it knowledge becomes solipsistic and leads to hyper-rationalism, which damages the body politic. In Vico, this faculty is not daily practical knowledge, as the term is now used, but rather something closer to a 'collective imagination', which civilised humanity shares as a whole.³³³ Common sense is an intellectual faculty that also has an ethical foundation upon which natural law is based:³³⁴

Uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other must have a common ground of truth.

This axiom is a great principle which establishes the common sense of the human race as the criterion taught to the nations by divine providence to define what is certain in the natural law of the gentes.³³⁵

Without it, shared purpose is lost, and the world of nations, which recognise universal principles, is replaced by a world of tribes who are solely motivated by narrow concerns. This process of 'tribalism' is accelerated by the compartmentalisation of

³³² NS 141-142.

³³³ It also bears comparison to aspects of Aristotle's definition of common sense as that 'which is held generally or by the most'. See Aristotle, *Ann. Pr.* 24b 11.

³³⁴ On the discussion of *sensus communis* in Vico, see Hans-Georg Gadamer *Truth and Method*, 2e [1960](New York: Continuum, 2000): "The main thing for our purposes is that *sensus communis* obviously does not mean only that general faculty in all men but the sense that founds community. According to Vico, what gives the human will its direction is not the abstract universality of reason but the concrete universality represented by the community of a group, a people, a nation, or the whole human race. Hence developing this communal sense is of decisive importance for living". 21

³³⁵ NS 144-145.

knowledge and the loss of inter-cultural communication. Finally, even tribal societies disintegrate and the human being becomes once again like an exposed infant in the world. Vico's position on the social nature of self-consciousness brings to mind Fichte, who a half century later wrote that "The human being becomes a human being only among human beings".³³⁶

Vico hoped for a return to the "religious, truthful, and faithful" after the barbarism of reflection, but he never suggests how the individual trapped in his solipsism will find a real way out. His own Catholicism is too faintly expressed to believe that he thought it could offer a solution. Whereas a stoic might have found refuge in his cosmic city or the Christian in an eternal heaven, Vico's history holds out only the knowledge that the cycle will begin anew:

Hence peoples who have reached this point of premeditated malice, when they receive this last remedy of providence and are thus stunned and brutalized, are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures, and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. And the few survivors in the midst of an abundance of the things necessary for life naturally become sociable and, returning to the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples, are again religious, truthful, and faithful. Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundations of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God.³³⁷

³³⁶ J.G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right* [1796] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): "The human being (like all finite beings in general) becomes a human being only among human beings; and since the human being can be nothing other than a human being and would not exist at all if it were not this – it follows that, *if there are to be human beings at all, there must be more than one*. This is not an opinion that has been adopted arbitrarily, or based on previous experience or on other probable grounds; rather, it is a truth that can be rigorously demonstrated from the concept of the human being. As soon as one fully determines this concept, one is driven from the thought of an individual human being to the assumption of a second one, in order to be able to explain the first. Thus the concept of the human being is not the concept of an individual – for an individual human being is unthinkable – but rather the concept of a species". 37-38.

³³⁷ NS 1106.

This formulation surprises, coming from a professedly orthodox Catholic thinker; one would perhaps have expected coming from him the suggestion of an encounter with a personal deity that takes a more active role in history. But as it is, Vico's references to providence more closely resemble a pagan demi-urge than a Christian designer, and the defining doctrine of Christianity itself – redemption through revelation – is nowhere to be found in the pattern of the *ideal eternal history*. If God's hand could spread over history as the author of the pattern, why did He not include a chapter that would suffer man not to fall again into a state of barbarism? And even if He were absent from history, but present in the universe, why is not the knowledge of the *New Science* enough to save man from a return to that barbarism? One searches in vain to understand why Vico should have concluded that the return to barbarism was a necessity.

There seems to be an unexpressed conflict in Vico between the tenets of his religion and his findings as a philosopher. At the time in history when rationality supposedly reaches its peak, Vico describes the inevitability of its decline in almost the same breath; it is almost as if the most he can suggest to stave off this return to barbarism is to continue to practice, if not believe in, the rituals of religion. If that is the case, he seems to be saying that in these circumstances continuing to engage in the 'irrationality' of religion is actually a rational act, if that is a bulwark against the threat of social disintegration. He might be saying that in his third age of man, which is characterized by "a deep solitude of spirit and will", belief in a religious 'fiction' might be preferable to a profound scepticism that would envelop society without it. Could this have been his way of warning his age to reject the extremes of rationalism and thereby steer clear of the destabilization which he believed would follow the atrophy of religious spirit? Vico never says why he believed a new darkening of the mind was inescapable. Perhaps he meant to say, quite simply, that

the failure of God to save His people in history is really the failure of our imagination of Him. But, in the time he lived in, he could not have said that out loud.

The meaning of return:

Providence and the mind

Introduction:

The decisive sort of proof in our Science is therefore this: that, since these institutions have been established by divine providence, the course of the institutions of the nations had to be, must now be, and will have to be such as our Science demonstrates, even if infinite worlds were born from time to time through eternity, which is certainly not the case.³³⁸

Central to the *New Science* is the concept of providence, specifically the interaction between human and divine mind. If Vico's *ideal eternal history* is the unfolding of divine will in the human world, then the life cycle of the mind in the universal plot of history is also the story of human fulfilment of that intention. In short, the meaning of history is mirrored in the meaning of mind, for it is human mind which is the agent for its realisation:

This New Science or metaphysic, studying the common nature of nations in the light of divine providence, discovers the origins of divine and human institutions among the gentile nations, and thereby establishes a system of the natural law of the gentes, which proceeds with the

³³⁸ NS 348.

greatest equality and constancy through the three ages which the Egyptians handed down to us as the three periods through which the world had passed up to their time.³³⁹

What Vico meant by 'providence' is not made any clearer by his references to institutional Catholicism, for rarely does it resemble anything like orthodox Christianity,³⁴⁰ and when he does he studiously avoids mentioning anything that resembles a personal creator (it would not be unfair to expect) who is transcendent. This ambiguity has led to various interpretations of his meaning that do not include a traditional Judeo-Christian deity who participates actively in the creation.³⁴¹ 'Providence' can be read in Vico with almost equal legitimacy in several ways: one is as a metaphor for 'nature' itself, not unlike Spinoza's *deus sive natura* (god or nature); another is as a cosmic design that stands outside of nature, like an Unmoved Mover which abides in an empyrean of its own, but whose connection to the world is somehow established by human agency; and it has been viewed as Vico's answer for an all-inclusive principle of unity in the universe, which is like a cosmic force that is more natural and physical than divine. In all of these interpretations, the reader is faced with the question of how Vico intended human freedom and the creative processes of the mind to be reconciled with divine order and participation in the world. The concerns that the concept of providence present for an understanding of mind are principally two-fold: one is how to read the *New Science* as a "reasoned civil theology of divine providence"³⁴² that includes a teleological (but not es-

³³⁹ *NS* 31.

³⁴⁰ J. Samuel Preus, 'Spinoza, Vico, and the Imagination of Religion', *JHI* v. 50, n. 1 (1989), 71-93.

³⁴¹ See Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of man 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006): "[S]ince Vico neither uses theological arguments nor refers much to Scripture, the clash between Vico's Catholic commentators and those who locate Vico among the anti-religious philosophical current of the Early Enlightenment in the end almost entirely hinges on the seeming contradiction between Vico's 'claim that human history is the work of man' and his 'simultaneous and frequent insistence that it is the work of Providence'. 530.

³⁴² *NS* 385.

chatological) force in nature, but which is based on the free operations of the human mind that lead to its own self-development,³⁴³ and the second is how to understand the way the shape of Vico's *ideal eternal history*, which is the form providence takes in time, affects the nature of the mind's identity in time. Even if Vico's *ideal eternal history* and human free will can be reconciled in a reading of compatibilism, the question still remains how Vico intended to resolve the paradox of a providential plan for history and his assertion that it is human mind that determines the course of history.³⁴⁴ It might be objected that the *ideal eternal history* is causally overdetermined because Vico explains history by God *and* human agency. But it could be countered that God's working *through* human agency is an indirect form of causation that does not seriously challenge the primacy of human agency.

Shaping history

Penelope Corfield deftly describes how Vico's stages of history are ultimately dependent on the 'hand' of providence for their sequential order:

He (Vico) borrowed the traditional imagery of historical 'ages' but yoked them into a dynamic model. Each great era of history, he believed, represented a significant organizing principle, which expresses a stage in human development. Initially, there was an ancient Age of the Gods. Life was simple, if sometimes violent, and people were ruled over by kings. Then followed the Age of Heroes, when a feudal aristocracy prevailed by might, while, lastly, there prevails the Age of

³⁴³ See Gregory L. Lucente, 'Vico's Notion of "Divine Providence" and the Limits of Human Knowledge, Freedom, and Will', *MLN*, v. 97, n. 1, Jan. 1982, 183-191.: "Vico's inability to come to terms openly with this question, to find a straightforward means of reconciling human knowledge and freedom with divine intervention, gives rise to the ambiguity of his notion of divine providence, which is and is not strictly divine (since it stems from the deity but appears *only* in the world of men) and is and is not strictly providential (since it is concerned with human destiny) but *not* with fortune or fate", 184.

³⁴⁴ See *NS* 331: "But in the night of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question: that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind".

Men, in which people develop reason and laws but also risk becoming slothful and over-civilised. This model was underpinned, for Vico, by divine providence but was detached from a Christian commentary. It was intended indeed as a global scenario, applicable to all societies. Furthermore, Vico warned that the Age of Men will not automatically last for ever, if people lose too much of their primitive simplicity. In that case, the sequence will revert to its origins and recommence, making a cyclical or slowly spiralling history.³⁴⁵

By introducing a 'shape' or prescribed pattern to his history, Vico naturally provokes the question of how free will can operate in it, and also invites speculation whether mankind would not have achieved a level of rationality, his 'Age of Man', without the intervention of a providential source. It seems evident that the role of providence and the *ideal eternal history* would deprive or diminish Vico's principles of a man-made world of philosophical authority, unless he satisfactorily explains how human action is not fatalistically affected by it. The shape also influences the concept, or lack thereof, of finality. Although it is not untypical to include a 'conclusion' when speaking of a plan, the *ideal eternal history* is not conclusive, in spite of its recognisable shape of periodic cycles. Vico's history does not repeat itself exactly, but in each cycle there are elements which persist from the previous ones and also features that differentiate it from them. In this spiral structure that seems to endlessly rise on modifications made in the past, to speak of a direction of history that culminates in an apotheosis, whether pagan or Christian, is meaningless: traditional eschatology is not advanced in Vico's science. Yet Vico seemed determined to keep a theocratic view of the world while ignoring revelation. It could be that he thought, as deists later did, that revealed religion was a throwback to medieval metaphysics and was increasingly difficult to explain in terms of rational logic and empirical discovery. But it would not be correct to assume that in his ne-

³⁴⁵ Penelope J. Corfield, *Time and the Shape of History* (New Haven: Yale, 2008), 169.

glect, if not rejection, of revelation Vico then substituted 'progress' for it. Of course, revelation and progress do not have to be contradictory, but in the first instance it is assumed that the ultimate source and guide of mankind's development is external to it, while in the second, at least in a secular reading, that agency belongs to man alone. This quote from J.B. Bury will help to clarify the concept:

The idea of human Progress then is a theory which involves a synthesis of the past and a prophecy of the future. It is based on an interpretation of history which regards men as slowly advancing – *pedetentim progredientes* – in a definite and desirable direction, and infers that this progress will continue indefinitely. And it implies that, as a condition of general happiness will ultimately be enjoyed, which will justify the whole process of civilisation; for otherwise the direction would not be desirable. There is also a further implication. *The process must be the necessary outcome of the psychical and social nature of man; it must not be at the mercy of any external will; otherwise there would be no guarantee of its continuance and its issue, and the idea of Progress would lapse into the idea of Providence* [my italics].³⁴⁶

In one sense, then, Vico can be read as an early advocate of 'progress', in that he describes the movement in history towards a high degree of rationality as essentially the result of man's own efforts, and not an inevitable process generated by an "external will".³⁴⁷ But in another sense, Vico's description of the historical cycles does not conform to the common understanding of progress in which, theoretically at least, it can continue indefinitely toward man's perfection, for in Vico history ends in the *barbarism of reflection* and then begins all over again. The point in which it ends is not exactly from where

³⁴⁶ J. B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into Its Origin and Growth* [1920] (New York: Dover Publications, 1987), 5.

³⁴⁷ See Paolo Rossi, 'Bacon's idea of science', in *The Cambridge Companion to Bacon* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36: "The so-called faith in progress (as we find it in Condorcet, Turgot, Herbert Spencer, Auguste Comte) was principally supported by three beliefs: (1) there is a law in history that tends, through graduations or phases or steps, toward the perfection and the happiness of the human race; (2) such a process of perfecting is generally identified with the development and growth of scientific knowledge; (3) science and technology are the principle source of moral and political progress and also constitute the confirmation of such progress".

it began, but it is close enough to it to negate any progress that had been made.³⁴⁸ What are the arguments for and against the belief that Vico's concept of providence was divine?

The argument that Vico thought providence was divine

Towards the end of the *New Science*, Vico states the metaphysical necessity of his historical cycles is caused by providential design:

For the nations will be seen to develop in conformity with this division [of the three ages of the world], by a constant and uninterrupted order of causes and effects present in every nation, through three kinds of natures... (which) are all embraced by one general unity. This is the unity of the religion of a provident divinity, which is the unity of spirit that informs (*informa*) and gives life to this world of nations.³⁴⁹

Providence is usually interpreted as a matter of divine concern and provision for human needs or as a higher necessary order, a mode of cosmic justice, to which even divinity should conform. Traditional theism holds that God is a complete being, total reality or actuality, even before the creation of the world, but in Vico mankind holds a central place in the fulfillment of providence. Although there is not in Vico a ruthless dogmatism associated with the term providence, as might be expected in a rigorous theologian, it is nevertheless questionable why Vico would have burdened himself with it if he had wanted to distance himself entirely from the notion. Perhaps the reason why Vico insisted that providence played such a decisive role in history is that he believed without it history would lack foundational meaning beyond a simple account of events; for even if

³⁴⁸ Not all commentators agree that Vico has given sufficient justification for the necessity of 'return'. See L. Pompa, *Human Nature and Historical Knowledge: Hume, Hegel and Vico* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 166: "It is not open to Vico to suggest that, in the fully human age, people could – or *must*, as he claims – lose this progressively socialized nature and revert to a kind of nature which is proper only to man in his original brutish and unsocialised state".

³⁴⁹ NS 915.

they could be shown to be 'scientifically' established, there is nothing in the pattern of events itself that would justify or explain the notions of a moral order that is contained in providence, and which Vico says is fulfilled in the *ideal eternal history*.

Vico's universe is predictable because the laws of providence rest on the existence of God for their foundation. The same causes are operative in any place and time, and they attain a universal status because by establishing a principle for change whose origin is providential, and in this way the conditions for change become equivalent to the causes and ensure an *ideal eternal history*. It is not that his providence itself requires a return; rather that the mind, which is conditioned by nature, returns in its cycles to a point from which it began.

Vico often distanced himself from Spinoza and others, like Grotius, Selden and Pufendorf, who eschewed any providential participation, either of a Platonic or Christian type, in the course of human history:³⁵⁰

Hence Epicurus, who believes in chance, is refuted by the facts, along with his followers Hobbes and Machiavelli; and so are Zeno and Spinoza, who believe in fate. The evidence clearly confirms the contrary position of the political philosophers, whose prince is the divine Plato, who shows that providence directs human institutions.³⁵¹

The role of providence in history is related to a tradition extending as far back as Plato and Plotinus in which *Nous* is made material – immanent – in the world.³⁵² Within

³⁵⁰ See *Opere*, letter to Monsignor Filippo Maria Monti, 18 November 1724, pp. 306-307, where Vico points out the methodological faults in their anachronistic accounts of the origins of human development.

³⁵¹ *NS* 1108

³⁵² Croce had made the error of conceptual anachronism by reading Vico as a Hegelian, partly because Vico's theory of history is based on the contributions of the poetic mind to man's cognitive development, and Hegel took a position that art was ultimately a form of absolute mind. Together they agreed that no society can be founded without religion, and from this observation stems Vico's concept of providence and Hegel's cunning of reason. See Sandra R. Luft, 'A Genetic Interpretation of Divine Providence in Vico's New Science', *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 20, 18., 165: "For Vico the creative principle was mind, and mind, or God, was immanent in the world. Vico's use of the language of emanation to describe this imma-

this tradition, the soul uses the body, and providence uses man as its agent. Vico does make the distinction between direct and indirect providence, as the former pertains to the history of the Hebrew nation, and later Christendom, while the latter lays the foundation for human societies in general. And it is particularly in the case of indirect providence that human freedom plays such an important role, for it is a necessary condition for rationality to be able to make the choices that lead to the realisation of the providential design. This point, that gentile rationality is the result of man's own efforts, as opposed to the 'given' rationality, by divine intervention, of the Hebrews is a crucial distinction in the *New Science* and explains the entirely different means by which humanity as a whole participates in the providential order of the world. But at the same time that Vico places such importance on human endeavour and rationality to fulfil this design, it could also be said that he also undercuts man's role and responsibility by positing an underlying pattern that would seem to ultimately direct those choices.

Nevertheless, it can only be *conjectured* what possessed Vico to say what he did about providence if for him it was just a metaphor and not a theological reality. At a certain point, the question of whether his intentions were real or veiled becomes as much a psychological as a philosophical issue, and of that not much can be said. It seems safe to assume, however, that he could more assuredly stay clear of the ecclesiastical censors by markedly distinguishing between Hebrew and gentile historical origins. In this way he could uphold the Biblical narrative while at the same time introducing new philosophical truths within a secular timeframe. But if Vico was just advancing the concept as a guise for something else, such as an atheistic cosmogony, that still would not explain

nence, and his characterization of his conception as Platonic, allowed for idealist interpretations of the role of providence in the *New Science*".

why he placed providence foursquare in all sections of the *New Science*. Surely he could have lightly, but respectfully, referred to it throughout the work when it might have seemed appropriate to do so, but without making the same effort that he does to convince the reader of its significance to the work. And although Vico does not expressly promote a doctrinaire theology, the absence of one should not give reason to suppose that is evidence of a heretical viewpoint. His strict delineation of humanity into the two 'nations' of the chosen people (Christians and Jews) and gentiles could be interpreted as a sincere attempt to *build* on revealed truth by providing a 'scientific' explanation of the course of the rest of humanity that is left out of it. These two 'truths' do not have to be irreconcilable. Vico appears as a deist when discussing the gentiles, for them the creator is an indirect presence that lays down the laws of the universe but does not directly intervene. The gentiles achieve reason not through revelation, as was given in a distinctly 'intellectual' way for the Hebrews, who receive direct commands in articulate speech from their creator: they attain the same level of cognitive development and insight into eternal truths, but through the imaginative and later the intellectual universals. This is the way his science explains that the human mind mirrors and participates in the providential pattern of divine mind.

In spite of the necessary distinctions Vico makes between the two human 'nations', the differences could be in the final reckoning more apparent than real, for the real subject matter of the *New Science* is a common humanity that is united by a providential pattern that ensures that disparate peoples the world over share the same universal history. To avoid any notion that the universe was created solely on physical laws, and thus materially determined, Vico retained providence as an immanent power in na-

ture. It seems likely he thought that by doing so he could explain that free will was assured by divine, not natural, law.³⁵³

The argument that Vico thought providence was destiny

Vico's providence has very little, if anything, to compare it to the familiar Judeo-Christian idea of the apotheosis of the godhead, and this has made it vulnerable to arguments that it would be more accurate to speak of it as a universal plan or a cosmogony rather than a true manifestation of divine will. Even the language that is normally associated with religion is more ritualistic, for Vico, than sacred.³⁵⁴ And the scepticism is not diminished by Vico's examples of divine providence in the *New Science*, which are practically limited to references to "natural phenomena of thunder, lightning, and similar 'occasions'".³⁵⁵ Providence seems more like a force of destiny than the presence of a concerned creator. Benedetto Croce wrote:

Vico's historical thought... belongs neither to the Protestant Reformation nor the traditions of the Catholic Church, but solely to the Renaissance. We do not have to conclude that Vico rejected the belief in a transcendent creator; however, he made it difficult for anyone to understand how he intended to reconcile revealed and philosophic truths. If Christian revelation is not undermined in the *New Science*, its status or nature is highly problematic.³⁵⁶

Vico's God resembles more a general principle of nature than a theological entity, and this has cast doubt on the sincerity of his traditional beliefs, for while Vico refers to

³⁵³ See A. Funkenstein, *Theology and the Scientific Imagination from the Middle Ages to the Seventeenth Century* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1986), 281: "Natural law" is thus founded neither on social instincts nor on a computation of enlightened interests. It is rather the immanent, regular, "ideal" process through which civilization emerges time and again as man's acquired, collective "second nature".

³⁵⁴ This brings to mind Francis Bacon's comment in his essay 'On Unity in Religion': "The religion of the heathen consisted rather in rites and ceremonies than in constant belief". 67.

³⁵⁵ J. Mali, *Mythistory: The Making of Modern Historiography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99.

³⁵⁶ Benedetto Croce, *History as the Story of Liberty (La storia come pensiero e come azione)* [1938] (trans. Sylvia Sprigge, 1941) (New York: Meridian Books, 1955) 135.

an eternal creator the only examples he gives of his attributes are those of a temporal being. It seems that 'worship' of such a being is more appropriately carried out in the practice of ritual than in the contemplation of 'constant belief'. It could be, pure and simple, that Vico never thought of providence in a Christian sense:

Vico's 'providence' is essentially the outcome of nature in interaction with human aspirations, customs, and concerns. Time after time Vico invokes providence as the manifesting of reasoning human institutions, laws, and religions, guiding men equally whether they are Christian, pagans, or whatever, through the pull of their belief in the divine. Vico's 'divine providence' is, above all, a guiding force which, however men perceive and venerate it, actually manifests nothing at all that is 'divine' in a Christian or any monotheistic sense.³⁵⁷

It is not unreasonable to suppose, along with Israel, that the concept of providence was for Vico "merely a rhetorical device employed to smuggle in a wholly secular conception of the historical process",³⁵⁸ for other than providing a vitalistic principle (Vico's *conatus*) to history his providence as a force of nature appears less providential than 'progressive', if that is understood as a steady movement toward a rational definition of human nature.³⁵⁹ This force has also been compared to the so-called "invisible-hand" explanations which date from the late seventeenth century and which are most commonly associated with Adam Smith. What these explanations share is a description of a process in which self interest leads to publically-minded virtues. It is not hard to see that in a reading of this process, by which man is unknowingly and unintentionally participant in the fulfillment of providential design, Vico's historical stages more closely re-

³⁵⁷ Jonathan I. Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 534.

³⁵⁸ Israel 534.

³⁵⁹ Like Aristotle, Vico thought that natural objects have a natural tendency to fulfil their nature, but in spite of his profession of a Judeo-Christian providential teleology, which would not seem to allow a naturalistic determinism, Vico's *conatus* is similar to certain pre-Socratic naturalist philosophies.

semble a description of this type than a traditional theological account of man. Vico's most succinct statement of the heterogeneity of ends is contained here:

It is true that men have themselves made this world of nations (and we took this as the first incontestable principle of our Science, since we despaired of finding it from the philosophers and philologists, but this world without doubt has issued from a mind often diverse, at times quite contrary, and always superior to the particular ends that men had proposed to themselves; which narrow ends, made means to serve wider ends, it has always employed to preserve the human race upon this earth... That which did all this was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same".³⁶⁰

Here as elsewhere, Vico's practically total inattention to traditional themes of Christian salvation would seem to confirm suspicions about the essentially secular nature of his thought. Though outwardly he professed the faith, it requires no great stretch of the imagination to read his writings in the key of agnosticism. After all, what better way would there be to throw the hounds of ecclesiastical censorship off his track?

The argument that Vico sought a middle ground

There is another way to view the problem of providence, and it is that Vico sought to provide a 'mediative' solution to the division that marked concepts of the divine, social, and natural worlds. It could have been that his intention behind making providence a general principle of nature was to provide a transcendent structure to the phenomenal world, and by this to resolve the dichotomies between mind and matter, temporal and eternal, design and will, religious and philosophical. Perhaps Vico thought that these elements of cosmological significance should not be viewed as existing apart

³⁶⁰ NS 1108.

from one another, for they are entirely co-dependent and separated they lose all meaning. And so it is with human identity in the scheme of universal history, for Vico never states that there is a permanent self or soul of man that exists apart from material conditions; rather, he says that human identity is painstakingly constructed in the material world through cycles of passion and control, “*moti*” and “*freni*”, and this is an interdependent process from which finally emerges humanity *tutta spiegata*, that which has reached its full potential.³⁶¹ It might be preferable to describe the human role in providence as a ‘working out’ of history rather than ‘participating’ in history, if the unravelling of the providential pattern by mankind is to be emphasised over the mere experiencing of it, and it is the fundamental sociability of man that makes this process possible:

Accordingly men offer worship, sacrifices and other divine honours to God as to the Mind which is the free and absolute sovereign of nature, because by His eternal counsel He has given us existence through nature, and through nature preserves us. But the philosophers have not yet contemplated His providence in respect of that part of it which is most proper to men, whose nature has this principal property: that of being social.³⁶²

For Collingwood, Vico’s providential involvement in history does not need to interfere with a coherent historiography:

Here we reach for the first time a completely modern idea of what the subject-matter of history is. There is no antithesis between the isolated actions of men and the divine plan that holds them together, as there was for the Middle Ages; and, on the other hand, there is no suggestion that primitive man (in whom Vico was particularly interested) foresaw what was going to

³⁶¹ Vico was not alone among thinkers of his age in his concern with reconciling these divisions. See Funkenstein, 282: “Hobbes... mediated between nature and society by reference to the natural aetiology of the state. Its origin is dictated by the sense of self-preservation. Spinoza, on the other hand, altogether relativized the distinction between bodies natural and artificial; the state and its institutions, much as any physical compound, are nothing but a balance of forces. Vico sought the mediation between nature and society along a different path. He reinterpreted nature to stand for the very *process* through which man acquires a *second*, social nature”.

³⁶² NS 2.

come of the developments he was initiating; the plan of history is a wholly human plan, but it does not pre-exist in the shape of an unrealized intention to its own gradual realization. Man is no mere demiurge, fashioning human society as Plato's God fashions the world on an ideal model; like God Himself, he is a real creator, bringing into existence both form and matter together in the corporate work of his own historical development. The fabric of human society is created by man out of nothing, and every detail of this fabric is therefore a human *factum*, eminently knowable to the human mind as such.³⁶³

Conclusion

In light of these considerations, certain conclusions can be tentatively drawn with regards to providence in Vico. Providence is a manifestation of divine and human mind. It has an order and it is manifested in nature as the *ideal eternal history*. In so far as history is a human creation, it follows that providence is also in some sense dependent on human activity, for Vico never speaks of providence without discussing the participation of human mind, which is the agent for its realisation in time. Because human activity is essential for it to unfold, providence did not incur the character of a fatalistic order for Vico; for him free will exists because the mind is what mediates the construction of human order in the world. As a natural phenomenon, in part, the mind undergoes changes that are largely due to its own efforts, and man is responsible for his own destiny.

But in his search for law in human history is it legitimate for him to conclude that *all* mankind must necessarily follow this course? How can he speak of the principles of mind without inconsistency (or even cultural bias) when the mind is in a constant state of flux between one stage and another? He intended the concept of providence to save his model of mind from the contingency of purely natural processes that lack any sort of teleology. But it does not appear compulsory for his model of mind to follow the *ideal*

³⁶³ Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of History* [1946] (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 65.

eternal history without the pattern of providence to provide the riverbed for it to follow. Scientists in the seventeenth century found laws in nature and attributed their source to God or providence, but it was never believed that those laws depended on man for their existence.³⁶⁴ Vico's conception of human science, however, is entirely different from natural science because it is as much a product as a participant in providence. And, on the other hand, those principles of the nature of mind which he establishes likewise depend on the effects environmental conditions exercise on its functioning, and in this way avoids making of it a hidden mechanism detached from the material world.

In Vico the flow of history is reflected in the stream of human consciousness; the two are as inseparable as the river is from its bed. Mind, in Vico, is not marked by a beginning and end; rather it is a cycle that has points on its course but no ultimate goal. Vico's human mind does not lead to a conclusion in history, in a Hegelian or any other sense. But the significance of Vico's discovery of the co-dependency of mankind and providence is that it makes it hard to imagine man as an idle bystander in a cosmic plot whose ending is already written: Vico's human being is sublimely important in the unfolding of the cosmos.

Other than historical interest, there is not much attention given today in mainstream philosophy to an arcane concept like providence that belongs to an unobservable world. But it would be unfortunate if the irony of Vico's position was missed. For here, if with the pretensions of 'science' behind him Vico truly believed in the concept of theo-

³⁶⁴ See Isidore Epstein, *Judaism*, (London: Penguin Books, 1959): "But for the fulfilment of divine purpose human cooperation is necessary. Developing the Biblical idea of man as co-worker with God, the Talmud conceives man as having been chosen by God as his *shuttaf* 'partner' for the fulfilment of creation. Not for material interests alone has man been called to his great task. He was also selected as a special agent for the fulfilment of a purpose that transcends the physical boundaries of the universe, though it is through the physical domain that the purpose can work itself out". 138.

logical providence, while also making of mind the creative agent of history, he seems to have confirmed by this belief, better than any other example he gave in the *New Science*, that the beliefs of an age are interesting historically, to borrow Collingwood's phrase, not because they are 'true' but because they are believed in. But, in brief, the fundamental nature of return is that the world is constantly reformulated according to a providential pattern whose forms are infinite and inexhaustible but whose principles of organisation remain fixed and finite.

Conclusion

SUMMARY

The focus of this study has been to ascertain the meaning of Vico's exposition of the human mind in the *New Science* and if it is coherent. In the main, it appears that it is because he succeeds in finding a way to reconcile conflicting aspects of the accounts of mind contained in the humanistic and rationalist traditions. There are certain aspects of his account which if they do not directly invalidate his main conclusions, nevertheless present explanatory gaps that require resolution, and these will be discussed here: they are his concept of mental identity; the relativity of truth and knowledge; and the relationship between history and mind. But first, to recapitulate what has been said thus far.

Broadly speaking, Vico attempted to frame the existence of mind as a product of continuous development that is shaped by natural, social and linguistic elements, rather than the emergence of innate faculties or a series of punctuated processes. The chief difficulties which Vico faced in forging this account were to eschew the concept of an essential human nature, on one hand, and to explain, on the other, how the mind maintains ontological homogeneity throughout the phases of history which he describes: both of these relate to his overall explanation of how the mind and history are two parts of a single whole. They will be discussed separately, and then the latter issue will be addressed.

In the first instance, instead of adopting a traditional Abrahamic religious paradigm of the self or soul as an eternal entity possessing consciousness, Vico takes a radically different approach by positing only the existence of a physical commonality among all men. The subsequent mental and moral developments of the human race are the result of language and social structures working together in concert, and not the result of divinely-endowed innate gifts or biological instincts. In the second case, that of showing there is persistence of the mind's identity, without positing a unique mental substance, Vico builds the argument that although the states of mind differ their ontological continuity and homogeneity is assured by a somatic basis of all cogitation. The effect of both of these fundamental principles of his model of mind is to lay a new groundwork for understanding the mind as a universally-shared structure that is the result of human activity. And it is this conception which opens the way to philosophical justification of his *verum-factum* epistemological principle upon which his knowledge claims of the *New Science* are based.

The identity of mind

Vico does not compare the identity of the mind to a single immutable substance, like a Cartesian *res cogitans*,³⁶⁵ nor does he suggest that it is simply a mode of being in a Spinozian sense.³⁶⁶ Throughout the *New Science*, the identity of mind is realised solely through human effort and can never be confused with an objective substance that is

³⁶⁵ See Joseph Mali, *The Rehabilitation of Myth: Vico's New Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992): "By positing his collective-historical *mente* (which is roughly synonymous with what we mean by mentality) over and against Descartes' solitary *cogito*, Vico thus forged a new epistemological model of the nature and growth of knowledge". 64.

³⁶⁶ See Antonia LoLordo, *Pierre Gassendi and the Birth of Early Modern Philosophy*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007). LoLordo writes that Vico, like Gassendi, might have thought that the mind is incorporeal but that knowledge must have its origin in the senses. For Vico, the way we know the mind is through its material creations, even though he does not claim that its nature is material. Also, she writes that, like Gassendi, one of the dominant theories of Vico's work is his "insistence on the explanatory limits of natural philosophy". 283.

separate from historical circumstances, nor as the human component of a universal mind in the Stoic sense of a *logos*. It is a uniquely human property, like cultural artefacts that have a human source and cause, and as such it is more a collective phenomenon than an individual 'possession', and by that is meant that, in Vico, the human mind more closely resembles a persistent *activity* of shared social behaviour rather than an entity or essence *sui generis*. It is quite possible, however, that Vico was struggling to make a distinction between the individual mind and collective consciousness. In the case of the former, consciousness is considered as a phenomenological point of fact, while the latter is a cultural product of ideas and concepts shared by humanity as a whole. This account of mind as a collective identity stands opposed to the notion of an ongoing sense of self, and it stresses instead that the psychological continuity of an individual self depends on a larger human collective consciousness.³⁶⁷ Vico's mind is more of an action verb than an vague ontological entity separate from the material conditions that surround it.

If Vico is right that thought has a somatic foundation, then all thought is to some extent a product of physical processes and the perceptions which they influence; consciousness and higher rationality have their foundation in coordinated movement and social activity. From this perspective, which steers clear of the classical asymmetric mind-body problem, the analytical mind and the body are not mutually exclusive but are two parts of the same equation. Vico's answer to how the mind begins to formulate abstract concepts from that somatic foundation is that the imaginative universals represent a link between the two states of human being – the physical and the mental. The

³⁶⁷ This notion of 'selfless' identity is strongly reminiscent of David Hume's famous statement written a few years later in *A Treatise of Human Nature* [1739](Dover Publications: Mineola, NY, 2003): "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception". 180.

main difficulty with this interpretation, however, is that it raises the question whether a prior faculty of discernment is needed to distinguish between the literal and metaphorical meaning of those concepts, for psychological reflection is heavily engrossed with subjective feeling and guarantees neither objectivity nor universality. This point naturally brings us to the logical status of the mind's judgements with respect to the relativity of truth and knowledge.

The relativity of truth and knowledge

Vico's certitude that the world of nations was knowable is perhaps the most important conclusion of the *New Science*. Vico believed that the human mind could grasp the world made by men and comprehend the unchanging principles of the *ideal eternal history*. The basis for this knowledge is observation of the actions of men in history, and like the natural philosophers of his day he entirely rejects mystical or occult explanations for his science. And although, like them, he leaves behind religious revelation or mystical inspiration, he differed from them in his belief that this wisdom was attainable through the powers of reason when aided by the imagination. The imagination for Vico, it can never be stressed too strongly, is not the same as unarticulated fantasy, but is rather the faculty by which philosophical and philological findings are synthesised to produce a comprehensive vision of the world created by men. Vico's insistence on the central role that imagination plays in the formation of knowledge is the most strikingly original element of his epistemology and it set him apart from philosophers in his day, and also today, for whom the ontology of mental images is considered too obscure an explanation. Vico considered the imagination essential to higher cognitive processes for two reasons. The first is that he believed thought was grounded in images and not in abstract theoretical propositions, and secondly that when images combine to form stories

or accounts of reality they form the language of thought. This is the importance of his explanatory principle of the imaginative universals which enable new concepts to develop from simpler components.³⁶⁸

Contrary to the natural philosophers of the early Enlightenment who had adopted the thesis that scientific experiments should be conducted objectively and that the role or position of the enquirer should not influence the method of research, Vico believed this was patently impossible, for two reasons. The first was that, he held, the subject matter of scientific enquiry was itself largely determined by the subjective forces which shape the means of perception (and in this he can be considered a precursor of Kant and the modern hermeneutic tradition), and secondly because, whatever the results that may be obtained by experiment, a strictly objective position that included only observational data would still be lacking a mechanism that could ensure a compelling consensus among researchers about the interpretation of the data. It is for this second reason that Vico was unswerving in his conviction that rhetoric was an indispensable element of any scientific endeavour, for without it there was no way to establish a consensus of their findings among observers. But as it is implicit in this belief that man's mental acuity is sharpened by the sophistication of the language he possesses, it is implied also that it is dulled in the absence of the refinement which rhetorical tropes bring to language. Thus, Vico concluded that the mind could ultimately be a reliable and accurate instrument for the pursuit of truth, even though the measurements of individual re-

³⁶⁸ The same belief in the power of images to shape thought has found amplification in the work of Susanne Langer. See S. K. Langer, *Philosophical Sketches: A Study of the Human Mind in Relation to Feeling, Explored through Art, Language, and Symbol* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1962): "Metaphorical images penetrate deeply into our common-sense ways of thinking.... We often oppose what we call "poetic metaphors" to "hard common sense". But common sense is built on poetic metaphors. Yet common sense is not poetry. The power of seeing one thing in another, which begets our metaphors and conceptual models (the oldest of which are *myths* of nature and human life), leads also to a characteristically human thought process known as abstraction". 147-148.

searchers are never entirely absolute and objective. Collectively, however, he believed that true wisdom could be grasped by the unity of evidence mediated by common sense:

The wise man should be formed both of esoteric wisdom such as Plato's and of common wisdom such as that of Tacitus.³⁶⁹

Are these two concepts of rationality, the esoteric and the practical, reconciled in Vico so that they both retain epistemic legitimacy and not cancel each other out?³⁷⁰ Vico wanted to synthesise the two paradigms of knowledge, for each had a particular usefulness, according to the subject matter which it treated, yet he adamantly insisted that specialised knowledge would always require the critical appraisal of common sense in order to save it from overly abstract theorizing.³⁷¹ Nevertheless, unlike abstract thinking, *sensus communis* is based on the values and shared notions of a community, as opposed to the specialised scientific knowledge of a relatively small group of thinkers, and while its value lies in establishing boundaries for public discourse, it is still largely influenced by subjective factors, like feelings and emotions, and is not a scientifically reliable standard. But the making of abstract systems of thought intelligible to a wider public is only one element of the philosophical contribution of *sensus communis*, the other is that those systems themselves achieve greater consistency and coherence by the refined articulation and application which they receive by scrutiny in the public sphere. What esoteric reasoning contributes to *sensus communis*, on the other hand, is greater objectivity

³⁶⁹ Vico, *Autobiography*, 139.

³⁷⁰ This same acknowledgement that advanced cognition is achieved by the interaction of more than one distinct faculty is reflected in the conclusions of the cognitive scientist Marvin Lee Minsky. See Marvin L. Minsky, *The Society of Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1986): "What magical trick makes us intelligent? The trick is that there is no trick. The power of intelligence stems from our vast diversity, not from any single, perfect principle". 308.

³⁷¹ The same fundamental conclusion is shared by the historian Stephen Pepper in *World Hypotheses: A Study in Evidence* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970): "Common sense continually demands the responsible criticism of refined knowledge, and refined knowledge sooner or later requires the security of common-sense support". 45-46.

and inclusiveness of far-flung phenomena which are not apparently related but which are governed by the same general principles and this broadens the universality of popular human wisdom as a whole. As a result, when the two seemingly incompatible systems of reasoning come together, ethical and aesthetic decisions and values gain in philosophical cogency and scientific descriptions of reality are less likely to overwhelm the ability of average people to make sense of them and thereby lose their psychological and social bearings. This is not to say that total transparency is inevitable when scientific and aesthetic and ethical propositions are scrutinised under the optic of *sensus communis*, however, with it, certainly much that is incomprehensible is rendered intelligible to a larger public in the process of its application. And perhaps most importantly, when the question of philosophical legitimacy is brought into the equation, Vico's point against the ancient prejudice against rhetorical argumentation and reasoning, as opposed to syllogistic deduction of logical propositions, that it was fundamentally coercive and less than honest because it took aim at the emotions to convince, was precisely that at the root of all convictions is an emotional component without which the belief would remain an abstract and ephemeral proposition.

Why should Vico have been so concerned that knowledge was becoming increasingly obscure, at least to the masses, and compartmentalised? He might have chosen to accept this tendency as an inevitable consequence of the greater technical precision which new scientific instrumentation permitted; instead, he unceasingly railed against it throughout his life because he believed that a theoretical understanding of the world must be combined with an active concern for the human condition overall:

To be useful to the human race, philosophy must raise and direct weak and fallen man, not rend his nature or abandon him in his corruption.³⁷²

The philosopher serves an essential role in society, according to Vico, and the marginalisation of philosophy from public life was a threat he perceived to the health of society as a whole, for the philosopher alone maintains the esoteric acumen and moral perspective necessary to keep it from losing its cohesiveness. But it was just as important, for Vico, that the philosopher remain socially active because he believed conceptual consciousness to be a social product, and estrangement from the sources of thought would inevitably lead to an impoverishment of thinking and ultimately solipsism, which he termed the *barbarism of reflection*.³⁷³ This subject brings us to the third, and final, point: the relationship between history and mind.

The relationship between history and mind

According to Vico, at the beginning of history mankind faces the dangers of a hostile nature, and at the end he encounters the threat of psychic and spiritual disintegration. The first proposition is not hard to understand, but why does Vico say that mankind must necessarily regress to the *barbarism of reflection*, after it has won its freedom through Herculean effort from the *barbarism of the senses*? During this period of hyper-rationality, the institutions which had supported higher thinking fall into disuse. With the collapse of those institutions begins man's estrangement from his own works and he reverts to a state of bestiality. Civilisation, Vico is saying, is built by man and is destroyed by him. Or is it? Did Vico not write that divine providence had ordained those very insti-

³⁷² NS 129.

³⁷³ See Ray Jackendoff, *Language, Consciousness, Culture: Essays on Mental Structure* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), 364, for a recent discussion of how social cognition is a product of concepts, as concepts are the products of social relationships.

tutions “universal and eternal”?³⁷⁴ If this is the case, who is responsible for their genesis and end? Does this not seem to contradict Vico’s methodological postulate that “the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and [that] its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind”?³⁷⁵ The ontology of institutions is either a product of the human mind or of providence working through the *ideal eternal history*. Is there any way to resolve these two claims to make sense of the role of the mind’s agency in history?

Briefly, there are two main ways of interpreting the emergence of institutions. One way is that institutions are the product of man’s rational nature;³⁷⁶ the other is that humanity owes its identity to institutions.³⁷⁷ The key to this debate about the origins of human socialisation and institutions can perhaps be found in an examination of Vico’s final chapter of mankind – the *barbarism of reflection*.

When our human reason was fully developed, it reached its end in the true in the ideas themselves with regard to what is just, as determined by reason from the detailed circumstances of the facts.³⁷⁸

History, for Vico, is characterised by man’s permanent struggle for physical and emotional security; he is guided in these efforts by a powerful sense of justice which stems from the natural law that is instituted by divine providence, and which is heroi-

³⁷⁴ NS 342: “Our new Science must therefore be a demonstration, so to speak, of what providence has wrought in history, for it must be a history of the institutions by which, without human discernment or counsel, and often against the designs of men, providence has ordered this great city of the human race. For though this world has been created in time and particular, the institutions established therein by providence are universal and eternal”.

³⁷⁵ NS 331.

³⁷⁶ See J. C. Morrison, ‘Vico’s Doctrine of the Natural Law of the Gentes’, *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 16, 47-60: “Social institutions do not form man; rather, they are themselves the external formations of man’s poetic nature – his capacity of forming, making, and instituting”. 54.

³⁷⁷ See Max Harold Fisch, Introduction, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*: “Humanity is not a presupposition, but a consequence, an effect, a product of institution building”. Xliv.

³⁷⁸ NS 1045.

cally manifested throughout history by the people.³⁷⁹ It is not difficult to see here a description of man as Promethean protagonist who must continuously claim what has been denied him and is his by right, and it would not be illegitimate either to read Vico's *ideal eternal history* as a story of man's defiant struggle for liberation, from nature, tyranny, and, finally, illusion and self-deception. However, one might expect continuous progress here, for there is no ostensive reason why there should be a necessary limit if man is in control of his own destiny. But this is not the case in Vico, for he says that everything that has been obtained by the human race through the mind can be, and ultimately is, destroyed by him. The process of this collapse is complex, but Vico says that it starts with a slide into solipsism on the part of a society's hyper-rational individuals, the rationalist philosophers he takes to task for their insularity, and ends by infecting everyone. A loss of confidence in the permanency of institutions that before were able to provide psychic protection now overtakes man who suffers his self-awareness with acute unease. People become diffident and seek safety in their own consciousness, but this impoverishment of the social self is not accompanied by a greater interiority or depth of understanding, as might be the case if Vico thought man were endowed with a permanent self or soul as the Abrahamic religions teach. Quite the opposite, for this bleakness is only relieved by the total loss of rationality itself, and then mankind finds itself once again in the guise of a beast. One cycle of the *ideal eternal history* is complete and another is set to begin.

It is interesting that more than a hundred years after Vico wrote the *New Science* another philosopher, far from the Partenopean cultural landscape, described in almost identical terms the state of mind pervading his own society and which Vico called the

³⁷⁹ NS 146.

barbarism of reflection. This is what John Stuart Mill wrote in his *Autobiography* about his own age:

When the philosophic minds of the world can no longer believe its religion, or can only believe it with modifications amounting to an essential change of its character, a transitional period commences, of weak convictions, paralysed intellects, and growing laxity of principle, which cannot terminate until a renovation has been effected in the basis of their belief, leading to the evolution of some faith, whether religious or merely human, which they can really believe: and when things are in this state, all thinking or writing which does not tend to promote such a renovation, is of very little value beyond the moment.³⁸⁰

Mill's observation strongly supports Vico's thesis that when the foundations of a society or civilisation are shaken, in Mill's case by the paradigm shift of man's place in nature wrought by Darwin's theory, the effort to reconstruct psychological security is exhausting and debilitating, and in the process many of the institutions which the old belief system supported are swept away. Vico's *barbarism of reflection* also represents a transitional period, but with even more disastrous effects than Mill's circumstances. At this stage, the rational mind contributes nothing further to advancing the human race, either because it withholds moral direction out of disinterest for others or has itself reached a limit to make sense of the world. In the first instance, moral decrepitude is provoked by a lack of will; in the second case, cognitive ability is, not without tragical irony, overwhelmed by the complexity of the social world it has created. In either case, the mind's renovation will only occur through a realignment of the senses so that they are once again focused outward from the self-absorbed individual consciousness. This explanation conveys Vico's belief that humanity owes its identity to institutions, and

³⁸⁰ John Stuart Mill, *Autobiography* [1873], (London: Penguin Books: 1989), 180.

man freely takes responsibility for them. The *New Science* rests on the premise that history is made by man, not God, and that without institutions there is neither man nor history. It could fairly be said that Vico describes a religion of humanity in the *New Science*, rather than a religious interpretation of humanity.

The alternative premise that institutions are the product of man's rational nature would seem to be obviated by the account above. But the matter is not that simple. Although the concept of providence acquires a new, or very different, meaning from the Abrahamic religions' idea of God directing creation toward some good end, that does not mean that Vico intended to secularise the deity. In important respects, such as its universality and predictability, his providence resembles a scientist's notion of revealed rationality in nature, rather than the material manifestation of a personal god's will. However, this evidence of the logical regularity of social and mental phenomena is intended by Vico to establish the universal presence and justice of the Creator, not to repudiate His existence. Indeed, such a hypothesis would contradict the overall purpose of the work which is clearly stated at the beginning of the *New Science*:

This New Science or metaphysic, studying the common nature of nations in the light of divine providence, discovers the origins of divine and human institutions among the gentile nations, and thereby establishes a system of the natural law of the gentes...³⁸¹

But God's existence does nothing to change the conclusion that Vico's position in the *New Science* is that God does not intervene directly in history: God creates the world, but man makes history. In this account, Vico asserts that man is free and responsible for directing his own destiny, while he also maintains God's presence in the world. The

³⁸¹ NS 31.

mind is the means by which the human and the divine are united, and ultimately this is the meaning of mind in the *New Science*.

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