

# Vico's New Science

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## **Abstract**

This paper reviews Vico's idea of New science. It will be described that Vico developed his science along seven different branches. First, he proposed to make it a "rational civil theology of divine providence". Second, his science was to be a "philosophy of authority". In the third place, it was to be a "history of human ideas". The remaining four branches of the new science led to a speculative reconstruction of world history, including such matters as the span of time required for each period, the courses the nations run, the common elements of law and custom among the peoples, and finally, the principles of universal history. Then, I will remark how Vico came to his investigations through the study of jurisprudence, and developed the implications of the new science more completely in that direction and in the field of political thought than in most others.

## **I. Introduction**

Giovanni Batista Vico was born, in Naples, Italy, June 23 1668, into a poor family of a bookseller father and daughter of a carriage maker. He lived and grew up in mud-floored room that came to be used simultaneously as a bookshop, living room and kitchen. He received his formal education at local grammar schools, from various Jesuit tutors, though for most part, as he himself mentions in his Autobiography, he was self-taught ["teacher of himself"]. He came to be first interested for Plato, Tacitus and then to Machiavelli. He was gradually attracted to the philosophical speculations of René Descartes, Benedict de Spinoza, and John Locke which were penetrating Naples at the end of the 17th century. After an attack of typhus in 1686, he left Naples for Vatolla, south of Salerno, accepting a tutoring position in the home of Ducca della Rocca, that lasted for nine years. There he in fell in love with his pupil,

the young Giulia della Rocca. But due to “social barriers”, he was denied to marry with her, and Giulia who admired Vico, died at the age of 22, shortly after her marriage to a young man “of her sphere”. Vico returned to Rome in 1695 and four years later married Teresa Caterina Destito, a childhood friend, with whom he had eight children, three of whom died. With the exception of his favorite and younger son, Gennaro, his surviving children were a source of great disappointment to him. Though longing to earn a position of Jurisprudence at the University of Naples, he had no choice but to settle for a lower and poorly paid professorship in Rhetoric, until his retirement in 1741. Vico died in Naples on January 22-23, 1744, aged 76. Like many an eighteenth century scholar, Giovanni Battista Vico was in agreement with Alexander Pope's slogan, “The proper study of mankind is man”. But whereas the typical representative of The Enlightenment was to apply to him the principles of Newtonian mechanics (for example, David Hartley, *Observations on Man*, 1749; Julien La Mettrie, *L'Homme Machine*, 1748), Vico maintained that the only way to know man is in terms of his own creations – language, history, law, religion – in short, through the study of civilization.

## II. The Idea of New Science

Vico professed to be carrying on the work of Descartes, and he took sharp issue with both the Cartesians and the Newtonians for supposing that nature is properly understandable by man. Is it not true, he asked, that we can know only what we make? Then only God can understand nature, because it is his creation. Man, on the other hand, can understand civilization, because he has made it. This was Vico's Archimedean point, 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 modification of our own human mind”.<sup>[2]</sup>

Vico professed, at the same time, to be an adherent of the method of Francis Bacon; he claimed that he was merely carrying over into the study of civil affairs the method Bacon had applied to the study

of nature. What he seems to have borrowed from Bacon, however, is not the inductive principle which most people associate with the English thinker, but the practice of turning to sensible evidence to verify one's theories. Vico explained that his science consisted of two parts, reasoning and investigation. The former, which he called "philosophy", had to do with the development of theories on the basis of axioms, definitions, and postulates. The latter, which he called "philology", was the empirical study of language, history, and literature. He maintained that because these latter are founded on memory and imagination and are mixed with emotion, they do not give us the truth; but when they are consulted by an intelligent investigator, who has a theory to test, they are of paramount importance and make possible a science of man.

Vico's central thesis was that modern civilized man has come into existence through a process which is intelligible in terms of certain tendencies inherent in the human constitution. He conceived that initially men roamed the forest like wild beasts, giving no evidence of reason or compassion or any of the traits which have come to distinguish them. Only gradually did man modify his passions and discipline his powers, learning reverence and devising the institutions and inventions with which he has subjugated the earth.

Vico did not regard the process as accidental in any sense: it was all part of God's design. But the elements which Divine Providence made use of were, in his opinion, simple and understandable, and finding them was the aim of the "new science". He emphasized the role of providence in history, in order to guard against the belief in fate and chance of the Stoics and Epicureans. In his view, however, providence was a rational principle immanent in the world, rather than a mysterious will transcendent over it.

His work opens with a long list of axioms and corollaries, which should be studied carefully before one reads the rest of the book. They purport to give the fundamental traits of human nature that provide the dynamism for cultural evolution, together with the traits which determine the habits of poets and chroniclers whose creations must serve the scientist as sources. For example:

“Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance, man makes himself the measure of all things”.

“It is another property of the human mind that whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand”.

“When men are ignorant of the natural causes producing things, they attribute their own nature to them”.

When, on the basis of such axioms, Vico turned to study the myths and legends of the past and with their help to reconstruct the prehistory of the race, the results were hardly in agreement with the assumptions of the eighteenth century drawing room. It was the fashion to think of primitive man as a tender, rational creature, who spontaneously worshipped the God of Nature and knew none of the prejudices or vices of artificial civilizations. Moreover, men took it for granted that Homer was a cultivated philosopher and gentleman, well suited to be a tutor of their youth – except they could not understand why he attributed such scandalous behavior to his heroes and his gods. In Vico's opinion, however, Homer was sublime as a poet in virtue of the fact that he was no philosopher, but a poet with a childlike mind, the product of a childlike age. We must read Homer with this in view and make allowances when we use his material in any attempt to understand his times. Similarly, his gods and heroes must not be judged by our moral standards. They echo the memories of an age when reason and morality had scarcely begun to tame the savage spirit or soften the features of the gods men feared.

Ransacking the myths of pagan peoples, and fitting what he found into the Biblical tradition, Vico constructed the following account. First, there seemed among all peoples to be a recollection of the Deluge; second, all traditions mentioned a time when the world was dominated by giants. Vico argued that God took the children of Shem to be the people of the Promise and conducted their development along supernatural lines which science was not

designed to explain. But the descendants of Ham and Japheth were permitted to wander abroad, unattended by divine grace, and to develop the civilization which was Vico's concern. They became a gigantic folk, said Vico, from the fact that after their mothers had weaned them they left them to draw their nourishment from the earth. They became fierce and wild, cohabiting like beasts, and fighting for their food. So it continued until climatic changes, which followed the drying out of the earth, brought thunderstorms into being. The lightning and roar of thunder astonished these savages, causing them to lift their eyes to heaven; and the fear which was in their hearts caused them to invent the first gods. Thus, according to Vico, religion came into being – the first step toward civilization.

The fear of the gods made man take a look at himself and made him ashamed of some of the things he did, particularly concerning matters of sex. When he took his woman into a cave, however, he initiated a series of consequences which he could never have anticipated. In a word, he created morality, the second great principle of civilization, and by bringing his passions one by one under control he liberated his higher capacities, notably reason. The Third principle of civilization recognized by Vico is witnessed by the universal practice among early men of burying their dead. Occasioned at first by the offensiveness of decaying corpses, it came to be the basis of his belief in the immortality of the soul.

In opposition to the orthodox views of his day, Vico held that civilization originated independently in many different lands—a principle which had importance for the study of etymology, to which he gave so much attention. Since each language had a separate origin, it was useless to try to find common roots. On the other hand, different languages could be expected to show parallel developments. For example, because law originally came from God, the Greeks, who called God "*Dios*", called divine things "*diaion*" and law "*dikaion*". Correspondingly, the Romans called God "*Jove*", and law "*jus*", which is a contraction of "*jous*".

It was a general principle with Vico that, on account of the unity of human nature, all cultures must pass through identical stages,

namely, the age of gods; the age of heroes; and the age of men. He found their existence attested not merely in mythology and epic poetry, but also in the history of religion, in compilations of laws, and, above all, in etymologies. For, following these three ages, there are three kinds of natures characteristic of men, three kinds of customs, three kinds of laws, commonwealths, religions, and so forth. Thus, in the first age man's nature was fierce and cruel, in the second noble and proud, in the third compassionate and reasonable. Again, customs of the first age were shaded with religion, those of the second with punctilio (for example, Achilles), those of the third with civic responsibility.

It was Vico's ambition to develop his science along seven different branches. First, he proposed to make it a "rational civil theology of divine providence". He was not alone, in the eighteenth century, in marveling at the "divine legislative mind" which fashions private vices into public virtues.

"Out of ferocity, avarice an ambition, the three vices which run through the human race, it creates the military, merchant, an governing classes, and thus the strength, riches and wisdom of commonwealths. Out of these three great vices, which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth, it makes civil happiness".

Second, his science was to be a "philosophy of authority". In place of the usual speculation about social origins, contracts, the beginnings of property, and so forth, it offered a framework within which to trace the development of sovereignty an right – from the time when authority first sprang from the will of the gods, through the age when it was lodged with princes whose might obligated those who came to them for asylum, to the time when free men concluded by means of reason that authority resides in laws of nature.

In the third place, it was to be a "history of human ideas". Poetry, for Vico, was the wisdom of the heroic age, when men thought in images an confused fancies with memories. It was, however, the

beginning of “the knowledge of good and evil”, and all the ideas which speculative science was later to bring to refinement were present there in the rough.

The remaining four branches of the new science led to a speculative reconstruction of world history, including such matters as the span of time required for each period, the courses the nations run, the common elements of law and custom among the peoples, and finally, the principles of universal history.

Because Vico came to his investigations through the study of jurisprudence, he developed the implications of the new science more completely in that direction and in the field of political thought than in most others. He maintained that civil societies evolve through three stages. All begin as aristocracies, which come into being because of the tendency of the weak to seek asylum at the altars of the strong. The peace and prosperity which result from this arrangement gradually strengthen the productive classes, who demand guarantees from their superiors. In time, a republic of free men, governed by law, replaces the aristocracy. But wealth and leisure breed effeminacy and greed. Citizens grow careless, and lawlessness prevails. Liberation comes when a strong prince establishes order and takes authority into his hands. In Vico’s words,

“Since in the free commonwealths all look out for their own private interests, into the service of which they press their nations, to preserve the latter from destruction a single man must arise, as Augustus did at Rome, and take all public concerns into his own hands, leaving his subjects free to look after their private affairs. . . Thus are the peoples saved when they would otherwise rush to their own destruction”.

Vico regarded aristocracies and republics as unstable, and maintained that states normally “come to rest under monarchies”.

In the century of Frederick the Great, it was nothing unusual for an enlightened thinker to argue in favor of an absolute monarchy.

Voltaire did also. But the development which we have so far described was, in Vico's view, only half a cycle. A nation might flourish for some time under a prince, as did Imperial Rome; but the fate of Rome serves notice that the irresponsibility of civilized men in an "age of reason" may pass all bounds and bring about the destruction of everything that had been built up through the centuries. And such was, in Vico's opinion, the eternal law of history. He saw civilization as a fragile achievement which Divine Providence frames out of violence, greed, and pride; but when the zenith has been passed it is destroyed by these same forces. No need, with Gibbon, to place the blame on alien influences and external barbarians! A new "barbarism of reflection" turns civilized men into worse than beasts. Reason disintegrates into skepticism: "learned fools fall to calumination the truth". Civic loyalties forgotten, the restraints of morality are turned into jokes. Men mass together in cities and push each other at public festivals, but they live in deep solitude of spirit: under soft words and polite embraces they plot against one another's lives. Their factions grow into civil wars, which destroy the land and let their cities return to forests. Those who survive are reduced again to "the barbarism of sense", until they learn once more the things necessary for life.

"Thus providence brings back among them the piety, faith, and truth which are the natural foundation of justice as well as the graces and beauties of the eternal order of God".

### **III. Conclusion**

Vico gained only a limited fame in his own time. The curious manner in which many twentieth century points of view are anticipated in his work has, however, brought him belated recognition. Pragmatics can see their doctrine of knowledge in his argument that we know only what our minds arrange and plan. Humanists find much wisdom in his account of civilization. Persons concerned with history as a science admire the way in which he combined hypothesis and investigation, and those whose interest is in plotting the cycles of cultures find fruitful suggestions in his work. James Joyce did



much to popularize his name among students of literature. And, inevitably, his account of the early giants creating their gods and fleeing in the shame to caves has caught the attention of some existentialists.

### Endnote:

1. It should be mentioned that the outline of the work that he planned to call *Scienza nuova* first appeared in 1720-21 in a two-volume legal treatise on the "Universal Law. According to his autobiography, since he lacked money to publish the full text of his work, Vico sold the only jewel he possessed--a family ring--and reduced his book by two-thirds. It appeared in 1725 under the title *Scienza nuova*.

2. All quotations are from Vico, Giambattista, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, Revised Translation of the Third Edition by Thomas Goddard Bergin and Max Harold Fisch, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1948; Cornell Paperbacks, 1976.

### References

In writing this article, besides Vico's own writings, I have greatly benefited from the following books and articles though not directly quoting from them:

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