



## The Vichian Sensus Communis As The Conservation And Surpassing Of Medieval Anthropologies

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**A**bstract: This article examines E. Sergio's studies on the concept of sensus communis as developed by Giambattista Vico, highlighting its historical and philosophical significance. The analysis positions Vico as a pivotal figure bridging medieval and modern thought: he inherits the intellectual legacy of the past while reinterpreting its core elements through a distinctly modern sensibility. Within this framework, sensus communis emerges as a key concept for understanding human social action—a perspective that, drawing from Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas (whose approaches modernity often rejects), finds its fullest expression in Vico's system. By privileging language as a primary mode of communication, Vico is shown to transcend the Hobbesian conception of human nature specifically through the lens of sensus communis.

### Keywords:

Vico, Hobbes, Aquinas, sensus communis, dialogical communication

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## **T**he New Science of Vico

Building on E. Sergio's studies, it can be argued that with the definitive 1744 publication of the *Principles of a New Science*, Giambattista Vico established himself not merely as the originator of new ideas, but as the founder of a genuine method—a framework that, in his view, structures the entirety of philosophical inquiry and can properly be described as the science of mind and history. Vico asserts: “Only that which is made can be known; that is, only what one causes. Not nature, but only history is a product of humanity; only of history, unlike God, can humans have certain knowledge.” Such knowledge is attainable only through mastery of those practices by which humans, in effect, “make” history: “In this sense, [the new science] achieves the perfect union of philosophy and philology, of speculative knowledge and concrete historical reality; the verum of philosophical elaboration meets the certum of historical reconstruction.” Vico's

magnum opus centers on the analysis of human nature and the composition of civil society through the categories of mind, language, and history—uniting philosophical (verum) and philological (certum) knowledge to provide true understanding of humanity and its social condition as realized in history.

According to Sergio, through this new method, Vico wants to abandon Cartesian rationalism and move away from British empiricism; the Neapolitan philosopher distances himself from the Euclidean mathematical method, the Galilean physical method and Cartesian methodical doubt, but also from Aristotelian-Thomistic abstraction. In Vico's view, verum and certum can coincide only through human knowledge, which is fully attainable only by means of a new approach that moves beyond the mere *mos geometricus*. In considering humanity from the Vichian perspective, it becomes clear that humans cannot be reduced to blind measurability or

abstract speculation—forms of reasoning that, by “flattening the diachronic into the synchronic,” allow truth to be obscured within the course of history.

Thus, in Vico’s new method, the emotional and sensory aspects of human experience are not subordinated to pure rationality. Rather, through his philosophy of mind, humans regain full self-awareness by refusing to confine themselves to calculable features. As history is constructed by the human mind—through philosophical reflection and philological reconstruction—authentic human nature becomes accessible to analysis.

### **T**he Vichian *sensus communis*

Through this perspective, Vico investigates what can be defined as historical caesuras – real changes of epochs markedly different from one another due to the degree of humanity reached by the people –, essentially tracing three of them among the many he indicated : a)

age of the gods; b) age of heroes; c) age of men. These ages are differentiated primarily through philological research, which Vico defines not as purely linguistic or terminological analysis, but rather as an investigation into language as a communicative act. The first age (a) is distinguished by a non-verbal dialogicality, the second (b) by a communicative intentionality and the third (c) by the functional-systematic creation of phonetic signs. At this point, however, it is necessary to dwell on that age distinguishable by “non-verbal dialogical”, since such an expression and interpretative-reflexive gaze poses a strong counter-tendency in the anthropological and political reflection of modernity – particularly in the reflection of the 18th century –, rehabilitating the metaphysical vision and reworking what can be defined – precisely from the modern age onwards – as man’s state of nature.

The problem of man’s state of nature arises, according to Sergius, because Vico, posits as the

‘factuality’ of history the triad *sematha*, *pathemata* and *logos* , mediated and utilised by man through the corresponding triad *memory-fantasy-engineering* – peculiar and fundamental characteristics of the mind –, admits not a state of nature apart from man’s social nature, but a proto-linguistic state of nature, which is becoming linguistic nature, leads to human civilisation . Vico properly denies «ogni passaggio dal non-uomo all’uomo, ma, riconoscendo l’unità inscindibile dello spirito umano in ogni momento storico, vede chiaramente e mette in rilievo che tale unità varia per un intrinseco variare di aspetti predominanti in cui si riconoscono» the three components *memory*, *imagination* and *wit*. In short,

«secondo Vico le condizioni di possibilità del linguaggio verbale sono di tipo extra-linguistico; nascono [...] dalla rappresentazione di una *sineddoche* che si evolve in *metafora*, la quale riproduce lo schema primitivo della

comunicazione. La presenza comunicata di qualcosa che non si vede e non si sente. Un segno che è a metà strada tra l’interpretazione degli indizi e i segni allegorici. Attraverso il ricordo di questo evento, un evento fatto di immagini mentali, il bestione [uomo proto-linguistico] comincerà a familiarizzare con l’idea di un segno naturale che rinvia ad una realtà presente/non presente. Dopo questo stadio, egli non dovrà fare altro che integrare l’iniziale primativismo di identificare l’indizio con l’entità rappresentata. In questo caso è come se la religione primitiva che si snoda a partire da questo evento fosse l’anello mancante che dalla semplice produzione di indizi conduce alla produzione di segni, i quali, in quanto allegorie, rinviano a, o stanno per una realtà seconda. Il che è molto affine allo status dei segni verbali, che sono per l’appunto dotati di incertezza semantica e nei quali si comunica il senso di qualcosa che risulta distaccato, separato dalle circostanze della enunciazione o della rappresentazione. E per ciò

stesso, se ne può parlare in assenza» .

Language becomes fundamental in the new Vichian science, but this, as stated, moves from the mediation of the human mind, which, through the memory of natural signs, moves in the steps of phantasia to be able to produce phonemes and graphemes – the signs of speech – indicating tangible and immediate reality, but also non-present and mediated reality.

What is even more interesting, however, is Vico's stance on the ferinity of proto-linguistic man, which ferinity is essentially modified concerning the intervention of Providence, modifying that (animalistic) conatus for personal survival that the Neapolitan philosopher himself admits . In one of the most important political philosophies of modern history, that of Thomas Hobbes – which by Vico's time had filtered into Neapolitan circles –, man's state of nature is contrasted with Greek thought – or

it would be better to specify the contrast with Aristotelian political thought as is well known, pre-social man – and it is good here to insert the prefix 'pre', referring to Hobbesian thought, rather than the prefix 'proto' – lives for his survival and usefulness : it is not sympathy towards the other man that distinguishes man, but «the will to do harm » common to all. According to Hobbes, individuals in the state of nature seek to avoid the greatest natural evil—death. Consequently, human nature, manifested in the will to harm others as a means of self-preservation, inevitably leads to a perpetual conflict: the “war of all against all.” This threat can only be averted by a collective agreement among many, ensuring mutual survival. .

This political vision, based on a strong anthropological reflection, is preserved and surpassed by Vico who, as I have said, does not deny the primitive ferinity of man - to which, moreover, with the famous thesis of 'recourse', he affirms man can return over time -, thus

preserving it, but also overcomes it through the concept of *sensus communis*, which is defined as «un giudizio senz'alcuna riflessione, comunemente sentito da tutto un ordine, da un popolo, da una nazione o da tutto il genere umano»; it is «il mezzo con cui, nella temporalità storica e con il supporto delle facoltà sensibili della memoria, della fantasia e dell'ingegno, il vivente è messo nelle condizioni di apprendere comportamenti collettivi, di darsi istintivamente delle regole comuni», man's utility and necessity in living together, in the wake of natural law.

Through the *sensus communis*, while preserving and surpassing Hobbesian 'bestiality', Vico would seem to come closer to the Aristotelian conception that sees man as a political animal, the Neapolitan philosopher preserves and surpasses the gnoseological-political conception of common feeling (κοινή αἴσθησις), which remains linked to the virtuous path of Aristotelian man and is grafted, almost as a necessity, onto the

communitarian-political path. Furthermore, I believe we can say that Vico expands the definition of the political animal man by translating it, although never doing so in an explicit manner, into dialogical man, to which his political being subsequently follows. Now, it must be emphasised, however, that the Aristotelian conception of *koinesthesia* is not only surpassed – and in my view, preserved – in the approach to the dialogical man but is surpassed for the sympathy (συμπάθεια) every human being feels towards his fellow human being; This is why Sergius writes in his essay that the *sensus communis* is the «capacità di condividere il sentire altrui e di sentire condiviso il proprio sentire, una speciale “sintonia” di generare che è la *koinè aístheis* della propria specie, condizione della socialità che comprende ab initio sia la socialità “socievole” che quella “ferina”».

In this way, the *sensus communis* unfolds as that which makes man properly man, and man a political,



or rather communitarian (en' koinonía) animal, insofar as he is communitarian as a distinctive feature of his existence, and also in his existence as a beast, a proto-linguistic one, being an «sintonia dialogica con cui un individuo, sia pure nell'anomia della sua proto-soggettività, si riconosce come membro di una specie o di un gruppo perché ha una sintonia istintiva con quelli che sente e imparerà a sentire come suoi simili».

### **T**he *sensus communis* as medieval heritage and opening to modernity

It is noteworthy that the *koinē aísthēsis* inherent in *sensus communis* must be mediated by the human mind. The mind, initially unaware of itself as a subject, gradually acquires the subjective capacity to mediate the world through the production of signs. It is the human mind, through memory, imagination, and ingenuity, that civilizes the community by generating a proliferation of signs and symbols.

In Vico's thought, the emergence of language marks the triumph of the age of heroes, and the word itself becomes a universal signifier, concealing human meaning in ways later explored in psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious. . If this assertion draws the Vichian philosophical system into the present through philological reflection, I would like, in conclusion, to show how Vico, though often marginalized, functions as a potential bridge between medieval and modern thought.

It is remarkable that *sensus communis* not only preserves and surpasses Aristotelian *koinesthesia* but, through its mediation by the mind and its role in humanizing proto-linguistic existence, also retains and transcends Aquinas's scholastic conception of human acts. Aquinas, in wondering which act is properly human compared to animal acts to gain beatitude, states how the human act differs from an animal act in that, the human one, consists of voluntariness, which is absent in

animal acts as they lack intellectual knowledge, even if the latter possess, like Vico's beasts, a *rationem imperfectam*. Thomas, in distinguishing between human acts – which could be defined through Vico's language as the acts of proto-linguistic beasts, imperfect and marked to a greater extent by their sensibility rather than rationality – and human acts – those, properly, of the linguistic men –, designates the latter the attributes of intellectual-universal knowledge and voluntariness, affirms in fact how the «volontarietà libera permea di sé gli atti dell'uomo sino ad assumerli dentro gli atti umani, assumendo appunto volontariamente l'involontario». Although limited, and imperfect, the will by the same involuntary acts that present themselves as natural data and do not exceed sensibility is disposed to the ultimate purpose by human voluntariness. The *sensus communis* recovers this inheritance and surpasses it, positing the human act not only as a singular act but also as a communitarian act, capable of

being a factual act of universal history.

This conception is taken up and elaborated in the thought of J.M. Finnis, whom I retrieve here to emphasise how, while rejecting medieval thought and in particular Thomist-Aristotelian thought, Giambattista Vico retains its root to rework it. Finnis, using the category of flourishing, indicates how human realisation is integral not only because it is a continuous process over time, but also because it needs to involve the human and future community in the realisation of fundamental goods :

«integral human fulfilment is not individualistic satisfaction of desires or preferences. The ideal of integral human fulfilment is that of the realisation, so far as possible, of all the basic goods in all persons, living together in complete harmony. Is not such a perfect community the ultimate natural end of all human persons and communities? In a way it is. However, that community would include all persons, past, present, and future. [...] Although integral



human fulfilment is an unrealisable ideal, there is a sense in which it can be considered the morally true ultimate natural end of persons, both as individuals and in community».

Here then, like a true temporal caesura, in the word –language – which bears within itself every signification referring back to a meaning – therefore being essentially true –, implemented human action becomes personal history which, in feeling each one as part of itself and feeling each one as itself, transforming itself into community action, history becomes certain and true knowability of man.

### **A brief conclusion**

Through this reflection, starting with the analysis conducted by the dear departed E. Sergio, Vico stands as a true avant-garde thinker who, through the concept of *sensus communis*, embodies not only the spirit of his time (the negation of the *ipse dixit*, the revival of

rationalism and empiricism, the subordination of philosophy to practical-ethical and political life) but also preserves what is the legacy of the near past that has just been bypassed to open the door to future metaphysical, historical and anthropological reflections.

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