

VICO'S PHILOSOPHY OF HISTORY

Introduction

Vico's intellectual development

Born in 1668 into a bookseller's family in Naples, Vico had a sickly, introverted childhood devoted much to reading. After a typical classical and Catholic education he attended the University of Naples to study civil and church law, a popular career path. Through his twenties, although working as a private tutor to a country family outside Naples, he kept up with the city's lively intellectual circles, for as one commentator puts it, 'despite his self-image of the solitary thinker [in his *Autobiography* of 1728] . . . Vico was not unclubbable'.¹ Amongst other intellectual societies, he associated with somewhat subversive intellectuals in an academy called the 'Investigators'. They were regarded with suspicion, and some prosecuted, by the Inquisition because they were proponents of the 'new learning' of rationalists, empiricists, and scientists, many of whom were regarded as 'atheists', particularly by a Catholic Naples (under Spanish rule) somewhat removed from the centres of European intellectual life. The Investigators' purpose, however, was partly precisely to keep in touch with the latter, and thus they found themselves engaged in the then European-wide controversy over the relative merits of ancient and modern learning – the 'Quarrel between the Ancients and the Moderns'.² The Renaissance humanists had of course claimed pre-eminence for the philosophies and literary graces of the 'ancients' (the classical world), but as the seventeenth century progressed this was increasingly challenged by the 'new learning' in science and philosophy and, especially in France, by those who argued that in the separate field of the humanities (including poetry, prose, and history) 'the moderns' not only matched but surpassed 'the ancients'.

As one scholar puts it, 'this conflict between the new and the old was undoubtedly the most exciting intellectual event in the Naples of Vico's youth',³ and he kept abreast of the issues, joining the Palatine Academy, which continued the Inquisitors' modernizing impulse. In 1698, now thirty, Vico became Professor of Rhetoric at the University of Naples. This post (held until his death in 1744) obligated him in teaching and research into classical authors, and ceremonial duties of delivering public orations and writing poetry and some histories. Thus placed,

as an educationalist Vico could not have avoided 'the Quarrel' even had he wanted to. Rather, he devoted much thinking to the issues during the early years of his post. Some of this is reflected in a work comparing the 'modern' approach to education with the traditional learning on the classics (*On the Study Methods of Our Time*, 1708), and in a work which urged, against Cartesian claims that ancient literature was worthless as a source of knowledge, that the ancient Romans' writings should not be neglected, but do need re-studying in terms of the origins of the languages and myths from which they had evolved in order to arrive at the 'real' knowledge they contain, (*On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*, 1709).

What emerges is that Vico equivocated between different aspects of the ancient and new learning. He could not gainsay the superior methodologies of modern philosophy in establishing mathematical, logical, and scientific truths, and was as impressed as anyone with the associated practical-technical achievements of the Scientific Revolution (an admiration he never abandoned).⁴ Yet he was increasingly uncomfortable with the notion that modern philosophy and science held the superior key to understanding *everything*, particularly in the 'humanist' areas of history, law, morals, and other human 'institutions'.

Rather, to think (as some 'moderns') that the wealth of classical humanist literature contained no insights about life contradicted Vico's intuitions. However, so various were the perspectives offered by the classics on the vast terrain of human and civil affairs, it seems Vico could at least appreciate the moderns' scepticism. An intricate and entertaining garden in which one could endlessly wander, the 'ancient learning' was also untidy and unplanned, demonstrating no *commonality* of either method or focus for understanding human affairs. In contrast, the 'new learning' was methodical, organized, and progressive.

Vico's 'great discovery'

A fresh outburst of the Quarrel (in France) from around 1710 further prompted Vico's ideas, since it revolved around the nature of ancient 'poetry' – especially Homer's, the (alleged) ninth-century BC 'father' of Greek literature. French Cartesians, battling for the 'moderns', refuted traditional claims that the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were unsurpassable expressions of philosophical and human wisdom set down in matchless poetry. Instead, they argued, the Homeric epics were riddled with ignorance, superstition, and disgraceful praise of barbaric behaviour. Homer's defenders, however, stuck to their view of Homer as the teacher of profound philosophical and historical truths. The dispute continued into the 1720s, and although it is likely Vico had for many years been independently mulling over the issues it raised – an alleged ancient wisdom, the interpretation of the nature of poetry, and the appropriateness of the learning of ancient cultures to modern times – there can be little doubt he knew of the row over Homer and that it added focus to his thinking.

This is because it was in relation to Homer that towards the end of the second decade Vico found his 'master key' which (according to him) unlocked the path

to nothing less than the true understanding of the course and meaning of human history. This 'master key' derived from reinterpreting ancient writings by locating the meaning of the language they used in terms of the cultures from which they emerged. Narrow and specialised as this methodology might seem, it was inspired by Vico's growing perception that the 'literature' of a people (drama, poetry, philosophy, history, mythology, legal codes, and other prose) should not be read 'literally', as from a modern standpoint. Neither (where it is poetic and/or mythical fiction) should it be read metaphorically, or cabalistically, as if it was some sort of code for a hidden, pristine wisdom. Either approach made the huge mistake of assuming that earlier peoples were so like later peoples, that the 'knowledge' contained in their diverse literary products could be judged by the same criteria modern Europeans applied to themselves. It was not just a question, for Vico, of recognising that earlier peoples lived in different times – the Renaissance humanists had brought that to light.

Rather, his 'great discovery' was that ancient peoples had a *general mentality* or mind-set profoundly *different* from that of subsequent periods. His contention was that ancient peoples did not view the world from a rational, objective standpoint, but from a fundamentally emotive, imaginative perspective which he called 'poetic'. This notion has strong affinities to that 'mythopoeic' outlook we discussed in Chapter 2, and Vico is at pains to stress the difficulties 'civilised' man has in empathising with this mentality and thus 'understanding' what it utters through its literature (or 'philology'). Ancient peoples viewed the world figuratively, with a kind of 'poetic' consciousness focused on concrete, expressive, individual features which they used, via vivid imagination, to describe their world by transposing them from one thing to another. Thus, for example, if dark clouds portend gloomy rain a *poet* might refer to a troubled man as having clouded brows – or use a metallic quality to describe someone courageous as 'a man of steel'. 'Modern' poets know when they speak like this – ancient men knew no other way, Vico suggests. In that sense they were not 'being poets' in their utterances – rather, they *were* 'natural' poets, and thus what they said about things has to be taken *literally*, but only once one has understood what they are referring to. This requires combining painstaking research into the 'poetic' references their language expresses with an historical-imaginative reconstruction of the world *they* experienced themselves as inhabiting. Only if we engage in this will we understand the knowledge (the '*poetic wisdom*') their 'philology' contains.

This, then, was the 'great discovery' which, according to him, Vico had been working towards for twenty years, and which he must have experienced as a moment of enlightenment, for in the early 1720s he began the exposition of his basic ideas on history precisely in relation to Homer's epics.

Vico's '*master-key*'

For Vico, this 'great discovery' was a *master-key*, since it impelled him towards that reconstruction of the course of human history he set out in his *New Science*.

(Although he had already written a massive work, *Universal Right*, in 1720 – an intriguing precursor to his versions of the *New Science*, yet only available in English translation since 2001, thus inviting much scholarly interest⁵ – he prepared the first edition of the latter work in 1725, and continued revising it intermittently until his death, a second edition appearing in 1730, and the final one in 1744). It achieved this because his theory about Homer held momentous implications for Vico. Not only did it ‘unlock’ Homer. In relating the language and ‘letters’ of peoples to their mentalities, and their mentalities to a (partly imagined) recovery of the world they inhabited, it opened up a methodology whereby Vico thought he could retrace distinct historical stages through which *all* ‘human institutions’ have passed. In addition, his linguistic (‘philological’) researches convinced him that although all ‘nations’ traverse the same stages, they do so independently rather than their cultures stemming from some single original source later transmitted to them. In its turn, this convinced him that all ‘human institutions’ *must* have passed through the *same* stages, and that therefore his work uncovered nothing less than the universal laws governing the history of ‘nations’ (or ‘gentes’) – what he variously called the ‘ideal eternal history’, ‘the common nature of nations’, or the ‘principles of humanity’. Further, his researches also led him to believe that a certain stage had been *repeated* in European history, and thus to hint (albeit obscurely) that history is cyclical overall.

Thus we find Vico claiming that to properly understand the nature of human societies and all the issues of ‘philosophy’ involved (e.g., methodology, epistemology, political theory, moral philosophy, comparative law), ‘we must reckon as if there were no books in the world’ up to now which have been of any use. This is because all scholars, classical and modern, had failed to appreciate the truly radical historicity of more ancient times and mentalities which Vico’s work had uncovered. They therefore held distorted views on the origins of society. And since, for Vico, there is a strong sense in which the ‘origins’ of a thing equate with the very ‘principle’ of a thing, then nothing of what they said about human affairs ‘is begotten of intelligence’. Scholars had consequently either praised the ancients for some alleged esoteric philosophical wisdom or regarded them as unworthy of attention from a modern age.

Instead, Vico viewed ancient writings as *evidence* from which he *inferred* their ‘poetic wisdom’, itself *evidence* of a different mentality. From there, one could proceed to *infer from the evidence*, rather than merely imagine, the actual circumstances in which human beings generated the first ‘institutions’ or ‘principles’ of society, and from which all else followed. And as we will see, Vico did not restrict his analysis to the first societies. As societies developed over the ages, human consciousness or ‘mentalities’ changed. Yet significant vestiges of the *language* of earlier times lingered on with modified meanings, but still relatable to earlier circumstances. Thus various seminal documents such as the early legal codes and historical mythologies of the Greek and Romans were not only hopelessly misunderstood by *later* scholars, but were often inherently confused themselves, often misappropriating words and terms from an earlier age. Vico displays a special

fascination in tracing such vestigial meanings in later literatures and employing the insights gained to better understand (i.e., 'scientifically') not only ancient but also succeeding epochs of human history.

Hopefully this exposition of both the general and more immediate origins of Vico's *New Science* will help in the reading of Vico's final (1744) version, otherwise a somewhat challenging experience partly because he is responding to those large and diverse themes outlined in the previous chapter. Not least amongst that complex, as we have seen, was the philosophical issue of *method* for achieving *true* knowledge. Reflective on the issue, and sensitive to its primary importance, Vico had his own ideas – of profound significance to his philosophy of history.

The question of true knowledge

The earlier Vico

Vico grappled with this issue from as early as 1708, and a good case can be made for claiming he altered his views on it⁶ by the time he worked on the *New Science* (especially from the 1730 version onwards). Nonetheless, aspects of his earlier theory of knowledge continued to play a part in the latter. In his (1709) work *On the Wisdom of the Most Ancient Italians* Vico elaborates his theory that 'the true' (*verum*) is 'the made', or 'that which is done' (*factum*). By this he means to refute the Cartesian notion that 'truth' is simply the property we ascribe to *statements* which follow *logically* from *definitions*.⁷ Rather, if we want to *know* or understand a thing *truly* we have to be aware of how it was made or done. Everything which exists (from natural phenomena and happenings to human events, institutions, and the arts and sciences themselves) is the product of 'making' or 'doing' (*factum*). Since this is the very foundation of all reality, it is also the very foundation of 'the true' (*verum*). All else is fiction or fantasy. Thus, if only that which is 'made' or 'done' is the true, equally, only that is 'the true' which is 'the made' or 'the done'.

On this basis Vico evaluated the 'truth' status of the various branches of human knowledge. But this exercise was premised by his insistence on the religio-philosophical notion that God made Nature (including man), and that God did this out of nothing other than His own intellect. Put simply, Existence in all its forms is the manifestation or 'product' of God's thinking – not, then, that God forged the things in Existence from some *pre-existing* primeval elements, but in the literally *radical* sense of conceiving everything *ex nihilo* from His own mind. Now (according to the pre-*New Science* Vico), the nearest human-beings can approach such 'making/doing' is found in mathematical reasoning, because here they engage in creating ideas and drawing conclusions from them solely from their own minds. Since, then, the 'knowing' and the 'doing' coincide in the mind of the mathematician, this is 'making' *par excellence*, such that mathematical knowledge achieves that equation of 'the made' (*factum*) and 'the true' (*verum*) nearest to Divine knowledge. It is the most 'true' or 'certain' knowledge. Next in order of

certainty is physics. It shares the exactness and clarity of mathematical reasoning, yet in dealing with the laws of *matter* the physicist is not creating ('making') the elements he is thinking about – (God, not the physicist, made Nature).

From this Vico constructs a descending order of disciplines. The more entangled a subject-matter is in the contingent externalities of the world, the further removed is the knowledge of that subject from the abstract clarity of mathematical principles. It is true that the problems of 'knowing' things external to the mind can be mitigated through the process of experimentation, whereby to an extent we replicate natural processes. Such work was common in physics, and chemistry was also beginning to benefit from it. But on both counts – their contingent externality and the difficulty of conducting repeatable experiments – certain topics remain relatively inaccessible to 'knowing', and Vico places 'ethics' at the bottom of the list. By 'ethics' he means that venerable and extensive area of (humanist) enquiry into knowledge of 'the good', encompassing justice, morality, and law (and thereby political institutions). Perhaps to our surprise, then, it is just the study of human *mores*, laws, and institutions which is the furthest removed from a 'knowing' validated through the equation of 'the made' with 'the true'. In short, for the earlier Vico, knowledge of what he later called 'the civil world', or 'the world of nations', is the least 'certain' or 'scientific'.

Yet over time Vico altered these views to the point where he implies it is precisely knowledge of the above subject-matter which we can put *most* trust in, *if* we follow the principles he proposes in his *New Science*. As a change of mind, however, it is clear it emerged from these interesting earlier reflections on epistemology.

'True knowledge' in the *New Science*

Principally in paragraphs 119 to 164 of the *New Science* (1744 edition), Vico set out his considerably revised views on the truth status of knowledge in a set of propositions which 'are general and are the basis of our Science throughout'⁸ and which, 'just as the blood does in animate bodies, . . . will . . . course through our Science and animate it in all its reasonings about the common nature of nations'.⁹ We have already noted his bold dismissal of all previous attempts to gain proper knowledge of human affairs, and he begins by saying that 'the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of humanity' is the propensity whereby, when man is 'lost in ignorance', he 'makes himself the measure of all things'.¹⁰ This spawns two fallacies – first, 'the conceit of nations', whereby each nation mistakenly believes that 'it before all other nations invented the comforts of human life and that its remembered history goes back to the very beginning of the world'.¹¹ This leads to interpreting cultural history as originating in a single source, from which it was subsequently transmitted to other nations – a grievous error leading historians, philosophers, and linguists into illusion and confusion. The second is 'the conceit of scholars', 'who will have it that what they know is as old as the world'¹² whereby in trying to give their own ideas a spurious authority they allege an esoteric and pristine wisdom existed in ancient times, to which their own ideas

accord. Since no such ancient wisdom existed, Vico insists, this is equally grievous an error since it generates a complete misreading of ancient cultures, and thus of history itself.

These remarks already suggest a more confident approach to knowledge of the human world than in his earlier epistemology, for now he is saying the deficiencies of such knowledge are not *intrinsic* to the subject-matter, but are explicable in terms of those common errors exposed above. Once avoided, he can proceed to establish the bases for a 'true' understanding of the human world. They are as follows: God created the world, and thus knows it absolutely 'since in God knowledge and creation are one and the same thing'.¹³ men can approach such true knowledge through 'science' or 'philosophy', which 'contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true'.¹⁴ Yet such (logical) reasoning deals only with *abstract fictions* of the human mind such as the 'points, lines, surfaces, and figures' *invented* by geometry (still an archetype of this kind of knowledge for Vico). In this sense, although philosophy discovers (logical) truth, its knowledge is deficient to the extent that it deals with abstractions rather than *real* things. Where, however, such 'scientific' or 'philosophical' reasoning is applied to real things, two problems continue to undermine the truth status of the knowledge gained. The first remains intrinsic, and is where the subject-matter is the *natural* world (e.g., physics, mechanics) – for man has not made the natural world, and so natural science, however expert, must ultimately remain incomplete knowledge. The second is where the scientist-philosopher, even when contemplating real things rather than abstractions, does not take sufficient care over the *empirical* details of his subject-matter (e.g., misperceiving it because relying on previous assumptions). This can still be a fault in the natural sciences, which is why Vico so much approves of Francis Bacon's 'method of philosophising, which is "think and see"'.¹⁵ But the philosopher-scientist can also contemplate the *human* world, and it is here in particular that Vico believes their knowledge has 'failed by half'¹⁶ through lack of attention to the empirical facts.

So 'scientific' or 'philosophical' reasoning, 'whence comes knowledge of the true', gives the certainty of *logical* truth and can be applied to both the natural and the human world. But in both cases it must get its *facts* straight. The facts in the natural world are made by God, and thus there is a limit to natural science's grasp of its subject-matter, although observation and experiment can achieve great insight. The facts in the *human* world, however, are 'made' in the immediate sense by *men*. Knowledge of these facts is what Vico calls 'philology', by which he means 'all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and deeds of peoples: both at home, as in their customs and laws, and abroad, as in their wars, peaces, alliances, travels, and commerce'.¹⁷ Now the knowledge or consciousness of *fact* is not the same kind of 'knowing' as that of the philosopher-scientists. They construct 'knowledge of the true', whereas knowledge of *fact* is what Vico distinguishes as 'consciousness of the *certain*'. He tells us that 'men who do not know what is true of things take care to hold fast to what is certain'.¹⁸ Knowledge of fact, (i.e., empirically based knowledge), thus bears

the stamp of 'certainty' rather than the hallmark of logical validity (the different province of philosophy/reason/science).

Now, logically speaking, there seems no reason to restrict knowledge of 'the certain' to the *human* world. After all, natural scientists-philosophers must also get *their* facts straight – and this must involve them in knowledge of 'the certain', which seems to be what Vico praises Bacon for. Yet Vico glosses over this, wanting to restrict knowledge of 'the certain' solely to knowledge of the *human* world. Thus where he introduces his distinction between knowledge of 'the true' and 'the certain' he writes: 'Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is author, whence comes consciousness of the certain'.¹⁹

Whether or not this constitutes an error in Vico's thinking, it evidences a distinct shift from his earlier epistemology – a shift crucial to the entire logic of his *New Science*, and which he therefore impresses on the reader. Now, in the *New Science*, 'the civil world' has been made by men, and can therefore come to be 'known' in a manner superior to the philosopher-scientist's knowledge of the natural world. Vico writes that it is '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', and complains of the fact 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'.²⁰ Again, 'this world of nations has certainly been made by men. . . . And history cannot be more certain than when he who creates the things also narrates them'.²¹ He thus suggests that his 'Science', because dealing with *real* things created by *men*, is (potentially) superior to natural science in respect of its truth status.

Thus the outlines of Vico's (new) epistemology – so much at the heart of his philosophy of history – become clearer. But as his response to seventeenth-century epistemological debate, what is Vico suggesting about the kind of method and knowledge his book contains? In our *modern* terms, is it 'science' or 'philosophy' – or in *seventeenth-century* terms, is it simply another example of 'philosophy-science' (applied to human institutions)? This is all the more important an issue because, in approaching the first example (in today's parlance) of explicit 'philosophy of history', it raises the vexed question of its disciplinary status or integrity. But Vico's answer seems clear. Rather than his *New Science* contributing to or combining any existing disciplines, for him it seems that (what we now call) 'philosophy of history' is nothing less than a new, independent discipline *in itself*, which his book *establishes*.

This is because Vico wanted to supersede the debates between 'science' and 'philosophy' and between rationalism and empiricism. For Vico, we can call knowledge of 'the true' equally 'science' or 'philosophy', so long as we mean knowledge derived from abstract logical reasoning. Knowledge of 'the certain', on

the other hand, is empirical knowledge of fact, but he restricts its reference to those matters of fact of which *men* are 'makers' and 'doers'.

Here we *can* properly 'know' the facts of the *human* world, but such empirical knowledge cannot stand on its own as a comprehensive *understanding* of that world, since its mode of knowledge does not involve knowledge of 'the true'. In short, the facts of the human world still need to be interconnected through the process of logical reasoning (science/ philosophy) in order to arrive at 'the truth'. Thus for Vico 'the truth' must be a mixing of 'the certain' and 'the true', and is, then, *more* than either factual knowledge ('empiricism') or science/philosophy ('rationalism') – it supersedes both. Vico calls it 'new science'. But above all let us note that for Vico this ultimate form of knowledge is *intrinsically* and *exclusively* knowledge of civil or human affairs, and thus in the broadest sense of the term, *historical* knowledge. By this we do not mean (merely) knowledge of history, but a method of knowing something comprehensively through making sense ('the true') of the facts – ('the certain').

And the only things amenable to such complete knowledge are those 'facts' made or done by men. This, however, is a huge area incorporating customs, languages, all kinds of institutions, legal codes, religious beliefs, social structures, and the arts, sciences, and philosophy – in short, nothing less than human *culture* in its broadest sense, or in his words, 'the principles of humanity'.

Thus we find Vico complaining how, in respect of the human world, '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 the philosophers'.²² When the two approaches are fused, according to Vico, the resulting knowledge is not merely a (now correct) understanding of this or that detail of civil affairs. Rather, it contributes to the understanding of 'this world of nations in its eternal idea'.²³ This is the final summit of his 'new science', achieving what he calls 'an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation',²⁴ such that we discover 'the eternal laws which are instanced by the deeds of all nations . . . even if . . . there were infinite worlds being born . . . throughout eternity'.²⁵ In short, that which is 'known' by Vico's 'new science' – the object of its knowledge – is nothing less than the universal laws governing the history of all humanity, whichever cultures, nations, or peoples it is comprised of. It would appear to be the *only* object of his 'new science', just as his 'new science' can only 'know' one subject – the universal principles of mankind wherever instanced through men organising themselves into the societal world.

In his own mind, then, Vico was not simply offering a revised version of human history on the basis of his discovery of new facts. Rather, he is highly aware of the radical status of his approach to knowledge – (like blood circulating the body, it 'courses through our Science') – and is equally anxious to publicise the fact: 'Hence we could not refrain from giving this work the invidious title of a *New Science*, for it was too much to defraud it unjustly of the rightful claim it had . . .'.²⁶ It is this feature of his work which, perhaps above all, justifies the claim that he is the first

explicit *philosopher* of history, and not surprisingly it is the feature which most continues to interest philosophers and historical theorists.

Vico's 'ideal eternal history'

Mankind's origins – the 'age of gods'

We may now proceed to Vico's actual account of the course and meaning of human history, beginning with its origins. From his reading of Homer, Vico claims that early men (i.e., before the dawning of classical Greek culture) had a profoundly different mentality from their more civilised successors. Being brute ignorant, having neither language or reason, living in dire straits, and prey to urgent fears, their consciousness was supersensitive to the immediately perceptible qualities of things they encountered, such that their awareness of the world was solely (and highly) figurative and imaginative. Initially mute, the earliest kind of language to emerge amongst these feral beings was, Vico suggests, 'singing' (see below). This evolved into the first spoken words, but these did not denote the common properties of things (as in our languages). Rather, they marked a thing's most importantly sensed impact, irrespective of its other features. And where something else provoked the same effect, the same word would be used to signify the thing.

It is this propensity to construct imaginative, figurative language that Vico calls 'poetry'. Interestingly, Vico thinks children's mentality is the perfect analogy. 'In children memory is most vigorous, and imagination is therefore excessively vivid; . . . this . . . is the principle of the expressiveness of the poetic images that the world formed in its first childhood'.²⁷ Again, 'Children excel in imitation . . . they generally amuse themselves by imitating whatever they are able to apprehend; This . . . shows that the world in its infancy was composed of poetic nations, for poetry is nothing but imitation'.²⁸ Vico delights in peppering his *New Science* with examples of how the meaning of words in use at a later time can be traced back to their initial figurative source. For example, referring to the Latin word *lex* ('law'), he writes:

First it must have meant a collection of acorns. Thence we believe is derived *ilex*, as it were *illex*, the oak (as certainly *aquilex* means collector of waters); for the oak produces the acorns by which the swine are drawn together. *Lex* was next a collection of vegetables, from which the latter were called *legumina*. Later on . . . when . . . letters had not yet been invented for writing down the laws, *lex* . . . must have meant a collection of citizens, or the public parliament; so that the presence of the people was the *lex*, or "law" . . . Finally, collecting letters, and making, as it were, a sheaf of them for each word, was called *legere*, reading.²⁹

The reader of Vico will find numerous such treatments of the origins of words (etymology), and the point here is not so much their accuracy but the rationale of

the exercise. For example, we know the word 'companion' derives from the *concrete* notion of 'sharing bread' (*com – panis*). Similarly, imagine a distant future in which space-travel is common and in which the term 'docking' persists. Then imagine how enlightening an account of where the term came from in the twentieth century (i.e., ships 'docking') would be. The next step, of course, would be to see where the *twentieth-century* term itself originated by consulting an etymological dictionary.

This is the significance Vico attaches to etymology. It tells us where ideas came from, and thus evidences the manner in which earlier cultures perceived the world – and, in turn, how *it* impinged on *them*. It persuades Vico that when language emerged from 'the earliest antiquity' and was eventually put into writing (initially signs and hieroglyphics rather than 'sheafs of letters'), the first men's knowledge of the world was comprised of what he calls 'poetic wisdom'. However, this 'poetic wisdom' has no connection with the (later) *rational*, analytical apprehension of things in terms of abstract genera. Rather, it is the expression of the heightened alertness to the striking features of things, creatively applied through a highly imaginative 'imitation' to identify and describe the surrounding world, and (as in Homer) it can reach 'sublime' heights. Although not 'rational', such 'knowledge' is thus essentially creative, and characteristically Vico traces the meaning of the word *poet* (in Greek) to *creator* or *maker*.

With these insights into 'poetic wisdom', Vico proceeds to construct the fundamental developments in human history since the Flood. Elaborating on the Biblical account, Vico claims that in Mesopotamia, after the Universal Flood, Noah established the Hebrew people³⁰ which, through keeping faith with the true religion of God, continued thereafter on a separate path from all other subsequent gentile nations (of which more below). But the descendants of Noah's three sons gradually renounced their religion and dispersed into three different races and areas of the world. The immediate post-Flood world, Vico claims, must have been covered in damp, dense forest full of wild beasts, and as the peoples of Ham, Japheth, and Shem dispersed throughout it, individuals must have become separated. In this precarious situation, fleeing from wild beasts, and pursuing women who themselves must have become increasingly wild and fearful, all vestiges of their previous culture disappeared.

Mothers, like beasts, must have merely nursed their babies, let them wallow naked in their own filth, and abandoned them for good as soon as they were weaned; . . . [W]ithout ever hearing a human voice, much less learning any human custom, [these generations] descended to a state truly bestial and savage.

Vico then suggests these feral creatures developed physically, 'excessively big in brawn and bone, to the point of becoming giants'³¹ (much talked of in ancient fables), and it is from 'these first men, stupid, insensate, and horrible beasts',³² that the history and institutions of all (gentile) nations emerged.

So (gentile, post-Flood) history began with an age of 'giants', horrifyingly and almost unimaginably sub-human in their brute natures. The stronger 'giants' naturally took to the drier safeholds of mountain-tops with caves – and such would have remained the condition of humanity were it not, according to Vico, for a dramatic event. After some hundreds of years of drying out, the earth at last produced sufficient vapour to cause the first thunder and lightning. Never witnessed before, and of such an awe-inspiring nature, it terrified and traumatized our feral giants, and none more so than those frequenting the mountain heights. Unaccustomed to pay attention to the sky, they now became aware of it, 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 bodily strength, who expressed their very violent passions by shouting and grumbling, they pictured the sky to themselves as a great animated body. . . . who meant to tell them something by the hiss of his bolts and the clap of his thunder.³³

This is the origin of gentile religion, whereby our 'giants' believed in a terrifying power 'speaking' in/from/as the sky, later called Jove. This event must have been replicated many times and to the same effect – such that 'every gentile nation had its Jove',³⁴ with correspondingly numerous names. Later, '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 . . . its creators themselves believed in . . . , and feared, revered, and worshipped . . . in frightful religions'.³⁵

The first effect of this traumatic experience of a 'voice' in the sky was to terrify the 'giants' into retreating into their caves, and 'to check their bestial habit of wandering wild through the great forest of the earth',³⁶ making them remain within a settled territory. This is the very seed from which subsequent social developments sprang, and without which there would be no societies in the (gentile) world – such that Vico puts religion as the first 'institution' of every nation. The essence of this 'religion' was, from fear of Jove's authority – (they had never felt 'authority' before) – to try to 'divine' what the signs made by Jove meant, leading to the auspices, oracles, and sacrifices of these 'frightful religions'.

The second effect was to restrain

their bestial lust from finding its satisfaction in the sight of heaven, of which they had a mortal terror. So it came about that each of them would drag one woman into his cave and keep her there in perpetual company for the duration of their lives. Thus the act of human love was performed under cover, in hiding, that is to say, in shame . . . In this guise marriage was introduced, which is a chaste carnal union consummated under the fear of some divinity.³⁷

In this manner the first *proper* families emerged – that is, where the offspring's parentage was certain. Since Vico insists all nations originated in families, marriage is thus the second fundamental principle of any society.

The third is burial. Surprisingly, all Vico says to explain this is that it came from the belief 'that human souls do not die with their bodies but are immortal'. But he also links it to the emergence of family lands (property) whereby 'by long residence and burial of their dead they came to found and divide the first dominions of the earth, whose lords were giants, a Greek word meaning "sons of earth"'.³⁸ Be this as it may, Vico observes that 'all nations, barbarous as well as civilized, though separately founded because remote from each other in time and space, keep these three human customs: all have some religion, all contract solemn marriages, all bury their dead'.³⁹ One might wonder at the prospects for our contemporary Western societies, in which all three 'fundamental institutions' are increasingly disrespected through, respectively, atheism, the 'sexual revolution', and 'spare part' body donor practices!

There is a sense in which Vico adds a fourth fundamental institution, for he says these first families cleared the forests around them and made fields. In short, property was introduced, whereby territory was delineated on family lines, put to economic use, and its boundaries defended.

In this initial stage, then, some 'families' were established, restrained by religion into the practices of marriage, burial, and settlement. These first cultivated fields were burnt clearings in the forests, and here we may give another example of Vico's intriguing use of etymology as evidence of features of ancient antiquity. These fields were called *luci* by the Latin peoples,

in the sense of an eye, as even today we call eyes the opening through which light enters houses. The . . . phrase that 'every giant had his *lucus*' [clearing or eye] was altered and corrupted when its meaning was lost, and had already been falsified when it reached Homer, for it was then taken to mean that every giant had one eye in the middle of his forehead.⁴⁰

This, then, for Vico is the origin of the myth of the Cyclops, the race of one-eyed giants, and we can see how he uses it both to arrive at the *historical facts* he claims underlie it and to explain their passing into 'mythical' form through the corruption of time. In this case, at an earlier age when the imagery of 'giants/fields/eyes' was a genuine perception of the figurative/associative 'poetic' consciousness, it denoted a true state of affairs. But in later times the different associations of such figurative language generate misunderstandings and myths whose meanings have to be interpreted – but not on the basis of some esoteric, hidden philosophical wisdom. Rather, the meaning and use of words has to be related both to where they *originated* and to the *present* mind-set of the culture now employing them. Their changing meanings over time are not only a potent clue to their *original* meaning but also to the historical circumstances and mentalities of the *succeeding* cultures who use them in their own way. He was especially proud of how his etymological/

philological researches into the earliest documents (Homer – ‘a vast store-house of knowledge’ – in Greece, and the Roman Law of the Twelve Tables) at last revealed and proved (according to him) the hitherto unknown or purely fantasised history of ‘the lost times’.

Vico called this first age ‘the age of gods’ or ‘the age of giants’. As we have seen, some of these ‘giants’ became subdued by ‘Jove’ and settled into the first form of social organisation, which Vico calls ‘the family state’.⁴¹ But other ‘giants’ (less ‘noble’)⁴² remained in the forests, and ‘impious . . . , continued the infamous promiscuity of things and of women’.⁴³ Eventually, however, their miserable circumstances (akin to Hobbes’ ‘fierce and violent men’⁴⁴ or Pufendorf’s ‘Big Feet’ giants⁴⁵) drove them to seek succour in the enclosed ‘fields’ or ‘asylums’ established by the god-fearing ‘giants’ already organised into family states. But the latter did not accept these wretched ‘refugees’⁴⁶ as equals. Rather, they killed the more violent newcomers and took the remainder under their protection as inferiors obliged to work and defend the land (belonging exclusively to the ‘nobles’). Vico variously refers to their status as like that of prisoners-of-war,⁴⁷ day-labourers,⁴⁸ slaves, ‘clients’,⁴⁹ or plebeians.⁵⁰ It was this development which ‘gave a beginning to society in the proper sense’, since although a prior ‘society’ had prevailed in the family state of the noble giants, it had only come about through their being ‘driven thereto by religion and by the natural instinct to propagate the human race . . . and thus gave a beginning to noble and lordly friendship’. But, importantly, it seems Vico denies that ‘friendship’ or ‘sociability’ is the basis for ‘society in the proper sense’. Rather, the latter only begins when formed from *practical* motivations. Society ‘proper’ fulfils practical need, not altruistic yearnings. Thus it was not until the subsequent stage, when ‘base and servile’ refugees ‘came out of a necessity of saving their lives’, that society began ‘in the proper sense, with a view principally to *utility*’.⁵¹

The ‘age of heroes’

Thus we arrive at Vico’s second age, the ‘age of heroes’, in which society proper began. During this age the small family-states of noble giants evolved into cities, or city-states, often expanded through military conquest. The form of government common in the heroic age was necessarily (given its origins) ‘most severely aristocratic’.⁵² The descendants of the first noble ‘giants’ retained their ownership of land through their status, guaranteed via the integrity of their lineage, and ruled their ‘plebeians, being considered of bestial origin’,⁵³ with what from a *later* perspective was barbarous cruelty. Vico does not minimise the brutal aspects of ‘heroic’ natures where, ‘being as yet incapable of reason’, the only law initially was that of force. But the outcome of force was regarded as a divine judgement and therefore just. It was ‘the law of Achilles, who referred every right to the tip of his spear’.⁵⁴ Thus issues between the noble families would often be settled by bloody duels, whilst any issue between noble heads of families and their dependents (servile

'plebs' or their own children) would be ruthlessly dealt with by the noble head who exercised a 'divine' right of life and death.

But barbarous as were these early aristocracies of 'the age of heroes', Vico insists we must understand and judge the 'heroic' mentality in terms of its own times, not ours. The noble families saw themselves as descended from a special lineage which had maintained its integrity through pious observance of the religious heritage of their god-like ancestors. Indeed, so intimate and integral had been their ancestors' communion with Jove (and with all the other gods they invented by 'ascrib[ing] to physical things the being of substances animated by gods'),⁵⁵ that they saw themselves as Jove's descendants, and jealously guarded their knowledge of the mysteries, rites, auspices, sacrifices, judgements, and modes of divination from their plebeian underlings. (Vico thus describes the first city-states as 'priestly aristocracies'). Given this mentality, (and the awe in which at least the first generations of refugees held their lords) a different morality from ours held sway – the virtues of 'heroism'. Order was ruthlessly maintained through the sword, and right amongst equals, including 'international relations' between different 'nations' or city-states, was established by appeal to divine judgement via force of arms (sometimes via duelling rather than all-out conflict). Reminding us of the equivocation in Machiavelli's notion of 'virtue', Vico similarly talks admiringly of the 'heroic' virtues, despite their seeming barbarity. Thus,

the strong, with a fierceness born of their union in the society of families, slew the violent who had violated their lands, and took under their protection the miserable creatures who had fled from them. And above the heroism of nature which was theirs as having been born of Jove . . . , there now shone forth preeminently in them the heroism of virtue. In this heroism the Romans excelled all other peoples of the earth, practising precisely these two aspects of it, sparing the submissive and vanquishing the proud.⁵⁶

Large sections of the *New Science* are devoted to explaining this 'heroic' mentality of barbarous times, the essence being that these peoples had intellects 'incapable of abstracting forms and properties from subjects',⁵⁷ but attended only to the striking *particulars* of matters, generating that vivid and imaginative 'poetic' consciousness described earlier. Combining this fundamental intellectual deficiency with 'their recent gigantic origin', Vico outlines their inextricably linked psychological character – 'the heroes were in the highest degree gross and wild . . . very limited in understanding but endowed with the vastest imaginations and the most violent passions. Hence they must have been boorish, crude, harsh, wild, proud, difficult and obstinate . . . and (yet) easily diverted'. But they must also have been 'bluff, touchy, magnanimous, and generous, as Homer portrays Achilles, the greatest of all the Greek heroes'.⁵⁸ Vico also believes that despite, or because, lacking the capacity for reason, they must have had exceptional memories, and that prior to the emergence of written language (at the end of their age) they preserved the

memory of important events (related to their society's origins and development) in figurative signs, later transposed into 'poetic' song as verbal language took shape. But we must understand that these 'songs' were not 'poetic' because they were songs. Rather, the first verbal language was 'poetic' because it emerged from 'a fantastic speech making use of physical substances endowed with life and most of them imagined to be divine'.⁵⁹ And it was 'song' because 'mutes utter formless sounds by singing', and 'men vent great passions by breaking into song' – thus 'the founders of the gentile nations, having wandered about in the wild state of dumb beasts . . . were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions, and formed their first languages by singing'.⁶⁰

These first 'songs' were thus histories of their societies, but posed in the necessarily 'fabulous' terms corresponding to their 'poetic' consciousness. Yet this does not mean the 'fables' containing their history were untrue. On the contrary, Vico insists 'the fables in their origin were true and severe narrations',⁶¹ and that they preceded the first *written* histories which after 'the long passage of years and change of customs'⁶² distorted their meanings, which were 'altered, subsequently became improbable, after that obscure, then scandalous, and finally incredible'.⁶³ This corrupting process was well under way even before Homer,⁶⁴ (whom Vico doubted as an historical figure, claiming that he stood for a tradition of mythical narration spanning centuries of Greek 'heroic' culture), such that the history of earlier times which his great myths recount requires a radical reconstruction in the light of Vico's method.

In short, what Vico employs in his 'discovery of the true Homer' is a highly suggestive, complex technique which uncovers the 'heroic' mentality and circumstances, which are themselves a product of the earlier, entirely mythopoeic mentality and circumstances of the 'age of giants'. Both 'spoke' poetically, but the latter's poetry was 'theological' and spoke only the truth (albeit in its own way), whilst 'heroic' poetry became increasingly fantastical in terms of the 'history' it related (although its meanings and referents can still be recaptured).

In practice (since, lacking speculative reason, they were nothing if not practical in their mentality) the 'heroic' peoples were concerned with what Vico refers to as the 'utilities and necessities of life' – territory, fields, corn, inheritance, boundaries, family lineage, authority, and terms of protection. Vico uses this notion to help disentangle the meaning of the words they used. Thus he found the (Roman) Law of the Twelve Tables especially illuminating. It is the other major 'document' he uses to complement the analysis of the 'heroic ages' he derives from Homer. But mention of this Roman source introduces us to the third age Vico identifies, 'the age of men', for in his opening 'Chronological Table' he dates the Law of the Twelve Tables at around the time when in Italy the 'age of heroes' had run its course. Appearing on the cusp of epochal change, the Twelve Tables are thus of seminal interest as a source both of the age from which they emerged and of that which was dawning. According to his Chronology, the same significance

attaches to Homer, for his epics appeared around the time this same epochal change occurred in Greece – some three hundred years before Italy.

The 'age of men'

What, then, is 'the age of men', and how did it come about? Vico uses the term to denote the age in which men became recognisably 'human' in their mentality. The fierce, passionate, unreflective 'heroic' nature dissipated, along with its purely imaginative, 'poetic' consciousness, to be replaced by 'human nature, intelligent and hence modest, benign, and reasonable, recognising for laws conscience, reason, and duty'.⁶⁵ Correspondingly, the 'age of men' sees the origins of articulate speech and written words, denoting things in terms of the genera to which they belong. In short, it witnesses the birth of philosophy and science, in which the world is now construed rationally by language denoting the properties of things according to the abstracting of universals. For example:

after the poets had formed poetic speech by associating particular ideas, the [human] 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' . . . They took the blood, the boiling, and the heart, and made of them a single word ('I am angry')⁶⁶ . . . [By these means] the minds of the people grew quicker and developed powers of abstraction, and the way was thus prepared for the coming of philosophers, who formed intelligible genera.⁶⁷

Interestingly, Vico claims the emergence of this 'human' language was hugely significant in *political* terms, for whereas 'hitherto [in the 'age of heroes'] . . . the nobles, being also priests, had kept the laws in a secret language as a sacred thing', 'human language' used:

words agreed upon by the people, a language of which they are the absolute lords . . . whereby the people may fix the meaning of the laws by which the nobles as well as the plebs are bound . . . Hence, . . . once the laws had been put into the vulgar tongue, the science of laws passed from the control of the nobles.⁶⁸

In short, a feature of the benign 'age of men' is that ordinary people appropriate the language. (Here we may be reminded of those concerns expressed today about scientists – and perhaps Internet users – speaking a different 'language', such that many people feel deprived of the ability to participate in crucial areas of public policy-making!).

Vico closely associates the gentleness of people in 'the age of men' to this dawning of reason. As he puts it: 'The people had finally come to understand that the rational nature (which is the true human nature) is equal in all men'.⁶⁹ If the mentality, form of language, and human nature were transformed in 'the age of

men', so were other aspects of their culture, including their socio-political organisation – and a brief examination of how the latter came about will help account for the demise of 'the age of heroes'.

Back in the first age (of gods/giants), order over the first 'fields' was maintained by the few pious giants, who governed theocratically via the taking of auspices and consulting oracles.⁷⁰ But as 'refugee' giants fled to these asylums for protection, over time these settlements grew in number and size, as did the number of the original 'pious' giants. A point came when the latter banded together better to guard their lands and authority against the growing numbers of 'plebs' they had taken under protection. The 'age of gods' was giving way to the 'age of heroes'. In short, 'commonwealths' or city-states emerged, under a now aristocratic form of government which Vico often describes as 'severe'. Once established, in these 'heroic or aristocratic governments, . . . in virtue of the distinction of a nobler nature ascribed to divine origin, . . . all civil rights were confined to the ruling orders of the heroes themselves, and the plebeians, being considered of bestial origin, were only permitted to enjoy life and natural liberty',⁷¹ whereby they 'shared only the labours of the heroes, not their winnings, and still less their glory'.⁷²

As these noble aristocratic commonwealths became established, (the nobles themselves often organised under kings they could not control), 'at last, after a long period, [the plebs] grew weary of being obliged always to serve their lords' and thus 'laid claim to the lands and rose in mutiny . . . and revolted against the heroes'. Some defeated rebellious bands,

committed themselves to the hazards of the sea and went in search of unoccupied lands. . . . This is the origin of the migration of peoples already humanized by religion . . . By means of such colonies. . . the human race was spread abroad in the rest of our world by sea, just as by means of the savage wanderings a long time before it had been spread abroad by land.

Vico insists these colonies must have been small, because reached by sea; were nothing to do with a non-existent empire (allegedly) acquired by the heroic aristocracies; nor with reasons of trade (with unoccupied lands!) – but were established because 'heroic law made it necessary for such bands of men . . . to abandon their own lands, a thing which naturally happens only under some extreme necessity'.⁷³

The majority of rebellious plebs, however, remained at home and began to extract concessions regarding the ownership of land and terms of service from their noble overlords.

The 'age of heroes' was drawing to an end, both in political and in broader cultural terms, eventuating in the emergence of 'popular commonwealths'. The barbarous modes of 'heroic' government and mentality were supplanted by 'the age of men' (or 'human times'), in which 'in virtue of the equality of the intelligent natures which is the proper nature of man, all are accounted equal under the laws'.⁷⁴ Reason now prevailed, and was applied to the practical needs of the (now free)

citizens in such a manner that 'universal legal concepts abstracted by the intellect' brought the citizens 'into agreement upon an idea of a common rational utility'.⁷⁵ This new 'practice of wisdom in affairs of utility' provides the basis for the 'mild law'⁷⁶ which characterizes 'the age of men', and Vico even suggests that the actual process by which popular assemblies first achieved this 'coming to agreement in an idea of an equal utility common to all of them severally' (as in Athens) prompted Socrates to 'adumbrate intelligible phenomena or abstract universals by induction'. In short, 'laws came first and philosophies later',⁷⁷ suggesting that the very rationality which lies at the core of 'human' men was not so much a product of some sudden intellectual revolution, but of changes in men's material circumstances. Yet it is clear from Vico's account that prior to the beginnings of actual philosophical reasoning (in Socrates), the mentality of ordinary people had already changed from the 'heroic'. It is just this interplay between 'mentality' and material circumstances which runs like a thread through Vico's analysis of the origins, development, and demise of all three different 'ages', and is one of the reasons (in addition to Vico's emphasis upon 'class-conflict') the more erudite Marxists find in him a precursor to Marx's 'historical materialism'.⁷⁸

Monarchy in the 'age of men'

Taking his cue from classical history (especially the rise of the Emperor Augustus in Rome⁷⁹), and yet happy to generalise from it, Vico claims the 'free popular states' characterising 'the age of men' are not its only political form. In principle, better even than such republics are monarchies. His reasoning is that 'in the former the citizens have command of the public wealth, which is divided among them in as many minute parts as there are citizens making up the people who have command of it' (even in republics not *all* are citizens). This can work, but given that 'love of ease, tenderness towards children, love of women, and desire of life' characterises today's strivings towards the 'utilities and necessities of life', then 'men are led to attend to the smallest details which may bring their private utilities into equality with those of others'. In other words, (to use modern terms), individualism and competitiveness always threaten neglect of the public good because individuals' concern for their own private good 'is the only reason of which the multitude are capable'.⁸⁰ Thus, just as happened in the Roman Republic where, 'finally, as the free peoples could not by means of laws maintain themselves in civil equality . . . but were being driven to ruin by civil wars, it came about naturally that . . . they sought protection under monarchies',⁸¹ monarchy is the other, better, and 'natural' form of government for free, rational, 'human' men.

In such monarchies, 'the subjects are commanded to look after their own private interests and leave the care of the public interest to the sovereign prince'.⁸² Lest this seem 'undemocratic' in today's terms, Vico has a different view, for he construes monarchy in 'the age of men' as *having* to best represent the common good of citizens, and thus as 'by nature *popularly governed*: first through the laws by which monarchies seek to make their subjects all equal; then by that property of

monarchies whereby sovereigns humble the powerful and thus keep the masses safe and free from their oppressions; further by . . . keeping the multitude satisfied and content as regards the necessities of life and the enjoyment of natural liberty'.⁸³ Thus in monarchies 'there are needed a few men skilled in statecraft to give counsel' regarding the conduct of affairs of state, whilst 'a great many jurists' are needed to regulate citizens' arguments over their private affairs.⁸⁴ In short, despite the benign tones in which Vico describes the 'age of men', he has a somewhat Machiavellian view of 'the multitude' as 'naturally' concerned in their own selfish interests. Thus, for Vico, 'monarchy is the form of government best adapted to human nature when reason is fully developed'.⁸⁵

The potential demise of 'the age of men'

There is, then, a certain equivocation in Vico's views about human nature in 'the age of men' – although essentially 'intelligent, . . . modest, benign, and reasonable',⁸⁶ Vico's insistence on the self-interestedness of 'the multitude' and their unsuitability to affairs of state is less than flattering. In fact, it seems Vico construes the 'properly human nature' of the 'age of men' as eventually departing from its optimistic origins to a point where the latter's very continuance is threatened. Again he appeals to classical history (especially Rome), but also generalizes from it. Essentially, 'the popular states became corrupt'.⁸⁷ In the case of Rome and other 'popular commonwealths', the common-sense of the (now reasonable and free) citizens initially determined that responsibility for governing should (via the census) rest with 'the industrious and not the lazy, the frugal and not the prodigal, . . . the magnanimous and not the fainthearted – in a word, the rich with some virtue or semblance thereof, and not the poor with their many shameless vices'.⁸⁸ But there came a point 'when the citizens were no longer content with making wealth the basis of rank', and encouraged by the 'false eloquence' of trouble-makers, 'strove to make it an instrument of power . . . [and thereby] provoked civil wars in their commonwealth and drove them to total disorder'.⁸⁹ In the case of Rome, the institution of monarchy under Augustus solved the problem – but clearly not permanently, and it seems that for Vico, whether 'human government' is under a republic or a monarchy a process of corruption is likely because of a natural evolution of the 'human' nature of people away from its benign beginnings.

He expressed this in two passages generalising from all three 'ages'. Thus, 'Men first feel necessity, then look for utility, next attend to comfort . . .'. But he continues, 'still later [they] amuse themselves with pleasure, then grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance'.⁹⁰ Presumably these latter are still features of human beings in 'the age of men', but they clearly point to a *deteriorating* scenario. The second passage follows immediately and in similar vein. Corresponding to the three different ages, '[t]he nature of peoples is first crude, then severe, then benign . . .' – but then he adds, 'then delicate, finally dissolute'.⁹¹ Should we doubt what these cryptic additions really mean, Vico elaborates on

them in the concluding passages of his book. We have noted his claim that 'popular states became corrupt'. This corruption can reach a stage where peoples 'become naturally slaves of their unrestrained passions – of luxury, effeminacy, avarice, envy, pride, and vanity – and in pursuit of the pleasures of their dissolute life . . . [they fall] back into all the vices characteristic of the most abject slaves (having become liars, tricksters, calumniators, thieves, cowards, and pretenders) . . .'.⁹²

This *moral* decline, whereby '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 . . .' is matched by an *intellectual* decline where that *reason* which dawned in man after the age of heroes becomes abused. Thus, 'as the popular states became corrupt, so also did the philosophies. They descended to skepticism. Learned fools fell to calumniating the truth. Thence arose a false eloquence, ready to uphold either of the opposed sides of a case indifferently'.⁹³ If unchecked, this intellectual decline leads to:

the misbegotten subtleties of malicious wits that have turned [men] into beasts made more inhuman by the barbarism of reflection than the first men had been made by the barbarism of sense. For the latter displayed a generous savagery, against which one could defend oneself or take flight or be on one's guard; but the former, with a base savagery, under soft words and embraces, plots against the life and fortune of friends and intimates.⁹⁴

How far these purple passages are evidence of Vico's disappointments at being neglected (e.g., Isaac Newton never acknowledged the first [1725] version of the *New Science* Vico sent him) is a matter of conjecture. Not so, however, his clear account of the gradual moral and intellectual failings of our 'benign' and 'rational' nature in 'the age of men', derived partly from his reading of classical history, but also elevated to being a general principle of 'human' nature. We, (if we can presume to be living in an 'age of men') will 'finally go mad and waste our substance'!

The recourse of history

The idea of 'recourse'

In Vico's account of (gentile) human history we have reached where the 'age of men' is threatened by the moral and intellectual 'corruptions' which Vico presents as integral principles of 'human' nature as it slides from benignity and rationality into 'delicacy', casuistry, and dissoluteness. His primary *historical* model for this is the transition from republican Rome to the 'monarchy' of Augustus – (his brief remarks on the subsequent downfall of the Roman Empire do *not* exploit this model⁹⁵) – but he clearly believes the same happened elsewhere in the classical world of 'the age of men'. The institution of monarchy is one of the 'three great remedies'⁹⁶ which can (possibly) correct 'the perfect tyranny of anarchy'.⁹⁷ A second remedy is that 'corrupted' societies 'become subject to better nations, which,

having conquered them by arms, preserve them as subject provinces' and their inhabitants as 'slaves'. Again, although thinking of historical examples, Vico sees them as exemplifying general principles of historical development. 'Herein two great lights of natural order shine forth. First, that he who cannot govern himself must let himself be governed by another who can. Second, that the world is always governed by those who are naturally fittest'.⁹⁸

The third remedy is the most interesting – and the most chilling. It is this:

But if the peoples are rotting in that ultimate civil disease and cannot agree on a monarch from within, and are not conquered and preserved by better nations from without . . . [then] 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 [their previous moral and intellectual faults, such that] stunned and brutalized, [they] are sensible no longer of comforts, delicacies, pleasures, and pomp, but only of the sheer necessities of life. [Thus driven (as if in some appalling post-nuclear holocaust)] the few survivors in the midst of an abundance of 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.⁹⁹

And from this return to the beginning of (gentile) history, 'the nations . . . , like the phoenix, rise again'.¹⁰⁰

It is, then, in this account of the third, most dreadful, remedy that Vico's notion of 'recourse' appears, and we need to be as clear as to what he is *not* saying as to what he is saying.

First, by 'the recourse' of history he does not so much mean the point where a 'nation' might have plumbed the very depths and has to start again, phoenix-like. Rather, he means that *if* a nation is subjected to this third remedy, *then* its re-growth will 'recourse' the same history of the succeeding ages of 'gods', 'heroes', and 'men' – but even here, only all other things being equal. Specific circumstances may intervene (as, for example, he suggests of the American Indians, who 'would now be following this course of human institutions if they had not been discovered by the Europeans'¹⁰¹). This is why Vico claims his 'science' is of 'an *ideal* eternal history'.

Second, (unlike earlier cyclical theories), it is far from clear that *all* societies will inevitably undergo a 'recourse'. Although it seems all will eventually reach that point of corruption in their 'age of men' described above, the return to primitive beginnings is only the *third* 'remedy'. They may be rescued from this by monarchy or conquest – although whether the monarchy or conquering power itself would eventually degrade into a corruption requiring the third remedy is another point. If it would, it looks as if Vico is indeed proposing a full-scale cyclical interpretation of past and future history. Yet he does not say so. He claims his 'science' demonstrates what 'the course of the institutions of the nations had to be, must be,

and will have to be . . . even if infinite worlds were born from time to time through eternity, which is certainly not the case'.¹⁰² This 'ideal eternal history' is 'traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline, and fall'.¹⁰³ He does not add, 'and its rise again'. In short, the 'ideal eternal history' does not mention 'recourse', and the most we can say is that whether 'recourse' is inevitable for every society in history remains unclear in Vico's logic.

'Recourse' in post-Classical European history

What is clear, however, is that for Vico 'recourse' is not only a theoretical possibility for some societies, but has actually happened in history – and his model is nothing less than the 'dark' and 'middle' ages of European history. He calls them 'the period of the second barbarism' and notes that 'in countless passages . . . we have observed the marvellous correspondence between the first and the returned barbarian times'.¹⁰⁴ He proceeds to bring these observations together in his sketchy Book Five called 'The recourse of human institutions which the nations take when they rise again'. Emerging from the confusions caused at the collapse of the (Christianised) Western Roman Empire, 'when so many barbarous nations began to inundate Europe and Asia and Africa', some Christian leaders in Europe held together their communities, and became akin to the kingly 'theocratic' family leaders of the first 'age of gods', fighting barbarous religious wars against like-organised pagan nations. In these recurred 'divine times', slavery, duels, raids, and reprisals re-appeared, and since 'everywhere violence, rapine, and murder were rampant, because of the extreme ferocity and savagery of these most barbarous centuries', new 'asylums' appeared where people 'in fear of being oppressed or destroyed betook themselves to the bishops and abbots, . . . as being comparatively humane in the midst of such barbarism, and put themselves, their families, and their patrimonies, under their protection'.¹⁰⁵

Then, for the same reasons as in the *first* 'age of gods', Europe evolved into those feudal institutions of the high Middle Ages, where powerful 'lords', barons, and petty kings formed aristocratic states better to protect their lands and control the lower feudal orders of serfs and vassals (the equivalent of the first 'plebs'). The 'age of heroes' was back, and Vico delights in drawing correspondences between its institutions, mentality, and customs and those of its predecessor. Feudalism, even where organised under nominal monarchies, was essentially aristocratic and culturally 'heroic'.

But just as the first 'age of heroes' evolved to a point where pressure from the plebs combined with factious civil wars amongst the nobles brought it to an end, so in many parts of Europe the second 'age of heroes' was supplanted by a second 'age of men', as feudal aristocracies turned into either 'free popular commonwealths' (i.e., republics) or 'perfect monarchies'. Rightly, Vico is not too specific about where and when this epochal change occurred, since it replicated itself amongst separate nations at different times. Also, the process was still incomplete by the time he was writing. For example, he claims that France 'now' has become a 'perfect monarchy'

– that Sweden and Denmark remained heroic aristocracies ‘until a century and a half ago’ – and that Poland still is one, although he adds that ‘in time, if extraordinary causes do not impede its natural course, Poland will arrive at perfect (that is, at absolute but enlightened) monarchy’.

The inevitability of ‘recourse’?

What seems clear, then, is that Vico sees much of his present Europe as having entered, or being in the process of entering, a second ‘age of men’. Whether he also already sees signs of its *demise* – and may thus be incorporating some political message into his writings – is another matter, best left to our concluding remarks. But it does graphically raise the question of whether ‘recourse’ is inevitable. By this, I do not mean whether, *if* a recourse occurs, it will run an inevitable course of repetition of ‘the three ages of men’. Vico clearly affirms it would. Rather, does ‘recourse’ *have* to happen to all historical societies? Since we have seen Vico’s *logic* leaves it unclear, we might try answering this by returning to his account of how the first, *actual*, ‘recourse’ came about.

That recourse began with the collapse of the Roman Empire in the fifth century AD. Logically, this means the Roman Empire, despite being under monarchy, must have reached that point of corruption and dissolution described above, from which (in its case) the third (dreadful) remedy emerged, involving a return to primitive times, succeeded by a ‘recourse’. And some such standard notion of the reasons for the Empire’s collapse seems to be in Vico’s mind. Yet he says surprisingly little about it. Having explained why all preceding ‘ages’ with their corresponding institutions inevitably change, he does not conclude his account with any hint that ‘monarchy’ in the ‘age of men’ must itself eventually decline and collapse. If he had, then indeed his logic points to ‘recourse’ as the inevitable outcome of the history of societies – and thus Vico would be subscribing to a full-blown cyclical theory of history. It is possible that he did, because elsewhere he does occasionally refer to the instability of ‘perfect’ monarchies. As different emperors succeeded Augustus (the founder of ‘perfect monarchy’ in Rome), the citizens became increasingly indifferent to politics to the point where, having become ‘aliens in their own nations, it becomes necessary for the monarchs to sustain and represent the latter in their own persons’.¹⁰⁶ In short, ‘in proportion as the free peoples relax their hold the kings gain in strength until they become monarchs’,¹⁰⁷ who, ‘by force of arms, take in hand all the institutions and all the laws, which, though sprung from liberty, no longer avail to regulate and hold it within bounds’.¹⁰⁸ Eventually, then, true ‘monarchs’ achieve absolute power. Now we have already seen Vico arguing that ‘in spite of their unlimited sovereignty . . . the very form of the monarchic state shall confine the will of the monarchs . . . [to] the natural order of keeping the peoples content’. But closer reading shows that this ‘natural order’ does *depend* on two factors.

First, ‘without this . . . content of the peoples, monarchic states are neither lasting nor secure’¹⁰⁹ – in other words, *if* monarchs follow their *own* interests by

attending to the *peoples'* interests, then they can maintain their states indefinitely. But this leads to the second condition hidden under Vico's apparent confidence in 'perfect monarchy' – the monarch must be of sound mind! And much earlier in the book, in one of his few references to the downfall of the Roman Empire, Vico blames 'the dissolute and shameless madmen, like Caligula, Nero, and Domitian' for having *themselves* overthrown the Roman monarchy through their actions.¹¹⁰ It seems Vico was returning to this notion in his brief reprise of the major historical stages in his Conclusion, where as an example of events turning out contrary to agents' plans, he says: 'The monarchs mean to strengthen their own positions by debasing their subjects with all the vices of dissoluteness, and they dispose them to endure slavery at the hand of stronger nations'.¹¹¹

Thus we finally arrive at Vico's surprisingly brief admission that monarchy itself, despite being 'the form of government best adapted to human nature when reason is fully developed',¹¹² is inherently vulnerable. The Romans, he tells us, 'clung to the monarchy as long as they could humanly withstand the *internal and external causes which destroy that form of state*'.¹¹³ It is true that even here he is not saying *all* monarchies are *inevitably* doomed, but if we add the preceding scattered references, a strong case can be made for claiming this as his real view. If it was, then by his own logic it would seem that recourse in history is inevitable, and that Vico *was* therefore advancing a cyclical theory of history. Yet this would require a theory of the *inevitable* and *cataclysmic* downfall of 'perfect monarchy' (and/or 'popular commonwealths') which, although hinted at, is not to be found in the *New Science*. The theme of the decline of the Roman Empire could have provided Vico with the opportunity to exemplify such a theory, and yet so far we find only one minimal reference to it (i.e., the madness of Caligula *et al.*).

One's puzzlement might be compounded, then, when we add the only other reference, and that the most sustained, which Vico makes to the topic, for in introducing his analysis of the actual recourse represented by the Middle Ages, he says:

When, working in superhuman ways, God had revealed and confirmed the truth of the Christian religion by opposing the virtue of the martyrs to the power of Rome, and the teaching of the Fathers, together with the miracles, to the vain wisdom of Greece, and when armed nations were about to rise on every hand to combat the true divinity of its Founder, he permitted a new order of humanity to be born among the nations in order that [the true religion] might be firmly established according to the natural course of human institutions themselves.¹¹⁴

Vico continues; 'Following this eternal counsel, he brought back the truly divine times, in which Catholic kings everywhere . . . founded military religious orders by which they re-established in their realms the Catholic Christian religion against the Arians . . . and numerous other infidels'.¹¹⁵

Here, then, the Roman Empire's downfall occurs when God, having established the Christian religion, saved it from foreign hordes by 'permitting a new order to

be born', in which 'the truly divine times' (of 'the age of gods') were brought back, thereby instituting a 'recourse'. Here, whether the downfall of the 'perfect monarchy' was natural or not, its drastic replacement by 'recourse' cannot be read as 'natural'.

But perhaps these very passages help settle the issue. They introduce the religious dimension which we have yet to address. For the present, the textual evidence suggests that Vico's otherwise curious reticence to complete his theory of history by clearly stating and analysing the inevitable downfall of 'perfect monarchy' can be accounted for in terms of his unwillingness to be seen as subscribing to a *cyclical* theory. The evidence suggests he *might* have done (certainly, numerous commentators assume unproblematically that he *did*), but that he shrank from declaring it, and even from including those prior considerations (on monarchy) which would properly lead to it. It is this latter exclusion which smacks of deliberation, suggesting that he did indeed subscribe to cyclical history, but knowingly concealed it. The immediate reason for doing this was simply that cyclical conceptions of history were regarded as pagan. The standard Christian notion of history was linear, with a beginning, middle, and end, as so fiercely insisted upon by Augustine (to whom Vico makes a few respectful, yet neutral references in his book). At the very least, then, the text suggests that Vico deliberately presented his theory of history in such a manner as to leave open the possibility of defending it from Inquisitorial and other public accusations of heresy. We might read him as a 'cyclicist', but his text makes it difficult to *prove*! And as for reading him as a *pagan*, that is clearly the last interpretation Vico wants, so numerous and obsequious are his expressions of Christian piety and devotion! But what part did religion really play in Vico's thought?

Religion and the meaning of history

The above reminds us that fear of religious persecution and of thus not being published were factors in many intellectual's minds in eighteenth-century Europe, even in more tolerant countries, let alone a Catholic Naples subject to the Spanish Inquisition. (Indeed, even a century after Vico's death, in 'free-thinking' England, such concerns were partly responsible for Darwin's twenty-year delay, until 1859, in publishing his *On the Origin of Species*). Thus we have to be careful not to accept at face-value what (particularly independent) thinkers wrote impinging on religion. Various techniques were employed, ranging from simple circumspection to hidden esoteric messages, to evade the wrath of the religious establishment (as well as public hostility and political persecution).¹¹⁶ This does not mean, however, that we should *automatically* distrust writers' words and seek to uncover alternative, devious meanings. But it does mean we are entitled to query those words when their import is obscure, or inconsistent with other ideas they advance. Vico's *New Science* is a case in point. He had a powerfully independent mind, lived and worked in Catholic Naples, desperately wanted to be not only published but lauded, and yet found himself writing on no less a theme than the meaning of human history, bristling with religious implications! He presents himself in all his writings as a

devout Catholic, and actually presents the *New Science* as a new and unique *proof* of that religion, as if that were his prime motivation.

Indeed, for those who take Vico at face-value, his *New Science* is one of the most sustained theodicies ('explanation of the ways of God to man') ever written – and they may be right.

With these provisos in mind, let us explore what he wrote about God, gods, truth, God's Providence, and the role of religions in human history.

Biblical history and the Hebrews

Describing 'the true God' as 'creator of the world and of Adam the prince of all humankind',¹¹⁷ throughout the *New Science* Vico excludes the Hebrews from his principles of historical development because 'the entire first world of men [i.e., after the Flood] must be divided into two kinds: the first, men of normal size, which includes Hebrews only; the second, giants who were the founders of the gentile nations'.¹¹⁸ Those Hebrews who remained true to their faith were distinct from all other nations because they correctly 'thought God to be an infinite Mind beholding all times in one point of eternity' whereas 'the gentiles fancied bodies to be gods'.¹¹⁹ The Hebrews were correct because 'the Hebrew religion was founded by the true God',¹²⁰ and were equally correct in believing that they 'had extraordinary help from the true God'¹²¹ who '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'.¹²² Because of 'the particular assistance which a single people [the Hebrews] received from the true God',¹²³ there is then a 'fundamental difference' between the principles governing Hebrew and gentile history.¹²⁴ 'The Hebrews were the first people in our world', and Vico insists that 'in the sacred history they have truthfully preserved their memories'¹²⁵ of 'over a period of more than eight hundred years [of] the state of nature under the patriarchs'.¹²⁶ This includes the times when, 'since the Hebrews had lost sight of their natural law during their slavery in Egypt, God himself had to reinstitute it for them by the law he gave to Moses on Sinai'.¹²⁷

Therefore Hebrew history is unique – and since their religion and institutions were never taught them by any outside culture,¹²⁸ and nor did they themselves teach other cultures,¹²⁹ their history should be excluded from consideration of the principles governing gentile history. It is the latter the *New Science* is concerned with. The former have had the benefit of the true religion, and of God's extraordinary help. The latter have had to make do with God's 'ordinary' help – 'providence' – a notion to which we must shortly turn. First, however, what does Vico say about Christianity?

Christianity

For Vico, 'God founded the true religion of the Hebrews, from which our Christian religion arose'.¹³⁰ The divine mind is 'understood only by God' – but men can know

of it to the extent it 'has been revealed to them. To the Hebrews first and then to the Christians, this has been by internal speech to their minds as the proper expression of a God all mind; but [also] by external speech through the prophets and through Jesus Christ to the Apostles, by whom it was declared to the Church'.¹³¹ By these means the Christian religion 'inculcat[es] an infinitely pure and perfect idea of God and command[s] charity to all mankind'.¹³² Apart from the Hebrew and Christian religions, there are only two other 'primary' religions, and they are both false – the gentile (or pagan) religion which believes 'in the divinity of a plurality of gods, each imagined as composed of body and of free mind', and 'that of the Mohammedans, who believe in the divinity of one god, an infinite free mind in an infinite body, for they look forward to pleasures of the senses as rewards in the other life'.¹³³

As human reason emerged in ancient Greece in the first (pre-Christian) 'age of men', certain philosophers (particularly Pythagoras and Plato) 'by virtue of a most sublime human science . . . exalted themselves to some extent to the knowledge of the divine truths which the Hebrews had been taught by the true God'.¹³⁴ This process of confirming religious truth through human reason has been extended in Christian times through Platonic philosophy and the Aristotelian tradition 'insofar as it conforms to the Platonic',¹³⁵ as well as through the other 'most learned philosophies of the gentiles' which the Christian religion has appealed to in its effort to 'unite a wisdom of [revealed] authority with that of reason, basing the latter on the choicest doctrine of philosophers and the most cultivated erudition of the philologists'. Because 'Christian Europe is everywhere radiant with humanity, . . . ministering to the comforts of the body as well as to the pleasures of the mind and spirit', Vico adds that 'even for human ends, the Christian religion is the best in the world'.¹³⁶

In these ideas Vico is 'orthodox' enough. But a problem looms. If the Hebrews are exempted from Vico's 'science' of historical development because of the 'extraordinary' help God gave them, what of the Christians? Subscribing to the true religion, do they also have 'extraordinary' help from God? If so, then most of what Vico says about European history since the downfall of the Roman Empire must also be exempted. And if that is exempted, then his theory of 'recourse' becomes incoherent. But if the course of European history through the Dark and Middle Ages down to Vico's present is a 'recourse' based on what governed historical changes from ancient antiquity to the fifth century AD, (excluding the Hebrews), then most of it is a 'recourse' of a *gentile* history, where God played no 'extraordinary' role – in which case, does God have no special role in *Christian* history?

Alternatively, if God *does* play a special role in Christian history, how can that history (principally of the Middle Ages) be seen as a 'recourse'? Yet Vico uses the content of this 'recourse' to *support* the general principles of historical development he claims are exemplified in ancient and classical (gentile) history! In short, whichever way he has it, it seems Vico is treading on dangerous ground. Not only might his theory of historical development be accused of an un-Christian belief in

cyclical repetition; it raises fundamental questions about Vico's beliefs about God's role (if any) in history.

'Providence'

Earlier, we noted Vico's important claim that God made Nature (which thus remains ultimately unknowable) but that men have made their civil societies (whose nature and history can therefore be known). Does this mean, for Vico, that God plays no part in the course of human history? On the contrary, Vico insists. Perpetually at work through the actions of free men is God's providence, which beneficially ensures the emergence of those institutions and practices which enable men to live together happily and constructively. In addition, it would seem, God occasionally intervenes in particular times with special, explicitly 'supernatural' help. Let us explore Vico's thinking here.

In what they do, men have free choice¹³⁷ – this is 'by its nature most uncertain', but rather than rendering human actions arbitrary, 'human choice . . . is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities'.¹³⁸ In other words, practical motivations amidst practical constraints determine the broad direction of man's exercise of free will.

Knowing what is *best* to do is a kind of wisdom – an idea of 'good and evil'. But such knowledge was originally prohibited to Adam by God, and it was on this basis that 'God ordained his true religion for Adam',¹³⁹ 'from which our Christian religion arose'. Meanwhile, the (pagan) gentile peoples tried to acquire this knowledge of what is best to be done, which they believed their gods had, by using the art of 'divination', (taking the auspices and consulting the oracles).¹⁴⁰ The *original* 'divination' was, as we have seen, the constraining effect of the first giants' experience of thunder and lightning.

Religious belief, then, can/does affect how people behave – a point we shall return to. For most of the time people seek the necessities and utilities of life, and this causes 'ferocity, avarice, and ambition, the three vices which run throughout the human race'. And yet 'out of the passions of men each bent on his private advantage . . . , which could certainly destroy all mankind on the face of the earth', orderly societies have emerged.¹⁴¹ This, Vico claims, proves that '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'.

This is what Vico means by 'providence' – the notion that there is a mind (God's) which, by making means of the 'narrow ends' of men 'to serve wider ends', thus employs the former 'to preserve the human race upon this earth'.¹⁴² This 'providence' is most clearly shown at each critical stage of the course (and recourse) human history has taken through the three ages of man.

Let us be clear here. Vico is not saying that providence works in extraordinary ways. On the contrary, it works through the very nature of things, including human nature rather than being an external 'force' such as 'fate' or 'fortune' governing history. It is thus not (God's) mind *behind* history and nature, controlling

them from 'outside'. Rather, 'this world . . . has *issued from*' mind, such that the way the world works when *left to itself*, i.e., naturally, guarantees the continuous survival and sociality of human life. The analogy of the watch and the watchmaker is *not* helpful here – rather, we might think of the watch and the watch *designer*, for if the watch is the human world and its history, and the designer is God, the watchmaker is man himself, as Vico so often stresses. It follows, then, that providence is not concerned with the fate of *individuals*. For Vico, it would be pointless for any troubled individual to pray for relief either *from or by* Providence, for providence is simply the way things turn out *collectively* in the natural order of things as (often unintended) consequences of the interaction of people's behaviour.

But finally, if providence is 'simply the way things turn out', it seems this by no means diminishes its significance for Vico. On the contrary, he not only claims that 'providence' proves the goodness of God, he comes close to claiming *his* theory of providence is a proof of the very *existence* of God. First, since God is infinitely wise, and since providence is what God has designed, then that design must, 'in its entirety', be one of *order*. Second, since God's will is 'immeasurabl[y] goodness', then that design 'must be directed to a good always superior to that which men have proposed to themselves'. Third, since God as designer is omnipotent, the design 'must unfold . . . by means as easy as the customs of men'.¹⁴³ Thus, if we properly understand human history, we have to conclude it demonstrates 'the eternal goodness of God', who has by such easy means so beautifully ordered its course that there is no way 'human society could be better conducted and preserved'.¹⁴⁴

Insofar, then, as Vico's theory of history demonstrates God's providence, and in so doing His omnipotence, wisdom, and goodness, it also attests to the very *existence* of God. Vico complains that previous philosophers have either failed to see human history as evidencing mind or providence, or alternatively have ignored history and sought to confirm God's mind by studying the laws governing the *physical* universe. But they ought to have confirmed it by studying it 'in the economy of civil institutions' in order to 'divine' therefrom 'what providence has wrought in history'. *Divination* properly means 'to understand what is hidden *from* men – the future – or what is hidden *in* them – their consciousness', and Vico's 'science' does just that, he claims. It is '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'.¹⁴⁵ And Vico implies that the study of history (if conducted via his methods) is a *surer* proof of God's mind than the study of natural science, because in tracing what men have *themselves* made, the knowledge involved cannot be more certain. In his discovery of 'the ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation', Vico is thus implying that his 'Science' is grounded in *fact* (knowledge of the certain), and is nothing less than a proof of the Divine Mind,¹⁴⁶ contemplation of which will give the reader 'in his mortal body a divine pleasure'.¹⁴⁷

Divine grace

If Vico attributes God a pre-eminent role in the course of historical development through 'providence', he also refers (much less frequently) to the operation of 'divine grace'. By this Vico means those occasions when God intervenes in *miraculous* ways, unlike the operation of 'providence' which is (simply) the natural order of things. As Vico puts it, 'man has free choice, however weak, to make virtues of his passions; but . . . he is aided by God, naturally by divine providence and supernaturally by divine grace'.¹⁴⁸ We noted Vico's claim that 'besides the ordinary help from providence, . . . the Hebrews had extraordinary help from the true God'¹⁴⁹ in the form of 'particular assistance'¹⁵⁰ – and a similar reference relating to early Christians:

When, *working in superhuman ways*, God had revealed and confirmed the truth of the Christian religion by opposing the virtue of the martyrs to the power of Rome, and the teaching of the Fathers, *together with the miracles*, to the vain wisdom of Greece, and when armed nations were about to rise on every hand destined to combat the true divinity of its Founder, he permitted a new order of humanity to be born among the nations in order that [the true religion] might be firmly established according to the natural course of human institutions themselves.¹⁵¹

Vico nowhere else refers to this 'extraordinary, supernatural, superhuman' action in the course of human history, and we should note that in both instances God employed it to establish and/or defend 'the true religion' (of the Hebrews, then the Christians). It would appear, then, that 'the true (Judaeo-Christian) religion' has been a literally *miraculous* phenomenon, not emerging in the natural order of things (i.e., via providence) like the other (false) religions. Now, we have seen that Vico exempts the Hebrews from his 'science' precisely because 'divine grace' intervened in their history. Does it now seem he wants to exempt Christian nations as well? If so, this would seem to nullify his account of the Middle Ages as a 'recourse' of the natural (providential) development of ancient and classical history. In short, although the operation of 'providence' is no threat to Vico's theory of history – on the contrary, he deems it crucial to it – the (sporadic) operation of 'divine grace' seems to stick out like a sore thumb!

Before deciding on this, let us examine the only other two references Vico makes to 'divine grace'. A recurrent point Vico is concerned to make, to solve an old dispute, is whether man is naturally sociable. His answer is that 'man is not unjust by nature in the absolute sense, but by nature fallen and weak'. But in addition to God's 'normal' aid through providence (i.e., the logic of the natural order), 'the Catholic principles of grace' are demonstrated, which 'give[s] effect' to man's potential for good works.¹⁵² Although a sparse remark, Vico probably had in mind that (Catholic) doctrine propounded by Aquinas that 'Nature is not destroyed by grace, but perfected by it'¹⁵³ – in other words, he takes the opportunity to conform to (Catholic) orthodoxy.

His final, longer and more interesting, reference to 'divine grace' forms part of his concluding remarks summarising the *New Science's* achievements. He tells us his book shows that those who believe chance governs human history are wrong (citing Epicurus, Hobbes, and Machiavelli) – similarly with belief in fate (citing Zeno and Spinoza). Vico claims 'the facts' show that 'providence directs human institutions', and praises those 'political philosophers, whose prince is the divine Plato', (and including Cicero) who agree with this. Both were non-Christian – but no matter, like the (pagan) Roman law-makers, they insisted on belief in 'providence' as the 'first principle' for the organisation of society. In short, they saw *religious* belief as essential. The fact that their religions were fierce, dreadful, and linked to barbaric practices – and even more to the point, were '*false*' in their knowledge of God – is not the immediate issue. Rather, they saw that 'if religion is lost among the peoples, they have nothing left to enable them to live in society'.¹⁵⁴ Thus, says Vico, those who think like Polybius, 'that if there were philosophers in the world, living in justice by force of reason and not of laws, there would be no need in the world of religion',¹⁵⁵ are deluded. Equally deluded are those who, like the French rationalist philosopher and religious sceptic, Pierre Bayle (1647–1706), argue 'there can be nations in the world without any knowledge of God'. Rather, 'religions alone can bring the peoples to do virtuous works by appeal to their feelings, which alone move men to perform them; . . . the reasoned maxims of the philosophers concerning virtue are of use only . . . for kindling the feelings to do the duties of virtue'.

Vico is clear, then. Any religion (however false its knowledge of God) is better than none, for religions appeal to the feelings, and thus to the senses – whereby even the mute, bestial 'giants' actually originated the course of human (gentile) history. But Vico adds:

There is, however, an essential difference between our Christian religion, which is true, and all the others, which are false. 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. The false religions, on the contrary, have proposed to themselves finite and transitory goods, in this life as in the other (where they expect a beatitude of sensual pleasures), and hence the senses must drive the mind to do virtuous works.¹⁵⁶

(Does this imply that doing good 'for its own sake' is miraculous, and reserved to Christians?).

Again, then, we encounter that same logic in Vico implying (intentionally or not) that the Christian religion is literally miraculous, for having earlier claimed that its *institution* was through 'divine grace', he now implies its *truth* is based upon its capacity to move men to virtuous action through the intellect – and that this is 'caused' by 'divine grace'. Without it, we have to presume Christianity would be

just one more 'false' religion emerging through the ordinary nature of things ('providence'). That it is true is not a matter of philosophy (natural human reason) nor of 'providence' (which underlies all religions) – it is a 'special, supernatural, extraordinary' matter provided by 'divine grace'. With perhaps an appropriate logic, then, Vico is appealing to a *deus ex machina* to substantiate his claim that the Christian religion is 'true'!

Was he sincere in what he says about 'divine grace' and Christianity's truth? And more to the point for us, does it matter in relation to his philosophy of *history*?

Religion and history in Vico

The answer is surely not. Logically, the notion of 'divine grace' is not only redundant to his theory of historical development – it actually interferes with its coherence. Likewise with the question of the 'truth' of Christianity. Both interfere with the whole point of his 'science'. But, as seen, Vico includes these otherwise literally 'extraordinary' notions, even 'conceding' that the Hebrew and Christian histories are exempt from his 'universal history'.

From this we have the probability of a Vico who merely pays lip-service to the orthodox (Catholic) Christianity of his day. If this is true, of course, it does not make Vico a closet atheist. On the contrary, there is no reason for disbelieving his sincerity in claiming his *New Science*, particularly in its treatment of 'providence', as a confirmation of the existence of God. Also, in praising certain philosophers' attempts to rationalise the nature of God, there seems little doubt he believed the Judaeo-Christian notion of God is along the right lines. But there is also no reason to suppose that Vico, like millions before and after him, kept his own deepest 'religious' views to himself, even if it involved his having to jeopardise the outward coherence of his cherished 'science' with arguments as ingenious as they are disingenuous. In short, unless we are to believe Vico was deeply confused in his thinking, we should perceive his *New Science* as a classic and extreme case of that self-censorship so prevalent in the history of thought. Arguably, only through such a recognition can the true meaning of his overall theory be revealed and its coherence be restored. It also removes obstacles otherwise obscuring the *political* dimensions intrinsic to his philosophy of history.

Political dimensions

Cyclical depression?

Our claim that Christianity's *truth* is irrelevant for Vico clears the way to discovering those political implications which are to become so allied a feature of modern 'philosophy of history'. We have noted the ambiguity surrounding whether Vico's theory of history is inherently *cyclical*. Many have taken his phraseology (e.g., 'the ideal eternal history'), particularly in conjunction with his idea of 'recourse', as straightforward proof that Vico did believe in a human history

which endlessly repeats its developmental stages and thus leaves no role for politics to be the vehicle for the 'fulfilment' of mankind. But that would be a simplistic reading of Vico. What is true is that Vico's own religious views did not oblige him to subscribe to the Judaeo-Christian *linear* theory of history, culminating in some kind of millennium. But neither do they oblige him towards classical cyclical fatalism.

Repeatedly, (as seen), Vico attacks those thinkers who believe in 'fate'. There is 'mind' or 'design' in the course of history – God's 'providence'. And what it provides is not some endless, meaningless repetition of stages of human history. Neither, however, for some unilinear progression towards human perfection or 'the millennium'. Rather, it provides for the formation, from bestiality, of *society* amongst men, and its continued re-formation through fundamentally changing times – in short, what we call 'civilisations'.

However, we know that according to Vico the first 'age of men', or 'human times', succumbed to collapse, followed by a 'recourse' of the three ages culminating in a second 'age of men'. The huge question (for Vico as well as for those attracted to his theory) is whether this second 'human' age is inevitably doomed to similar collapse, to be followed by a third cycle of 'recourse'. To the extent Vico answers this, we must look in his writings rather than arbitrarily extrapolate from his logic. And what seems clear is that he nowhere claims that 'providence' *decrees* the collapse of each different 'age'. Their decline (including the first 'human' age) happened principally as a result of that self-interestedness and assertiveness of human nature which generates class-conflict between those controlling power and wealth and the rest of society. Not the work of 'providence', it is the result of a 'flawed' human nature which has free choice. Were the chaotic collapse of a society's order and culture the work of 'providence', then God would not have been a benevolent designer. But if not providence, neither is it clear that 'human nature' *necessitates* it. The point for Vico is that societies *have* succumbed to fundamental disintegration in the past, and that *when* this occurred, *then* 'providence' decrees their re-formulation in a different mode. In short, the collapse of a form of 'society' is not a determined necessity of history (as in classical cyclical fatalism) – it is not the providential design. But the *resurrection* of 'society' (albeit in a new form) is the work of 'providence' – i.e., the existence of *some* form of 'civilisation' (however unattractive to those of a later period looking back anachronistically) is a 'determined necessity' of history – that is, it is 'inbuilt', irrespective of human choice and intention.

But such solace as this may afford in the abstract must be counterbalanced by two factors: first, we have seen Vico describe the dissolution of the 'age of men' in particular as an horrendous eventuality where 'peoples . . . rotting in that ultimate civil disease . . . live like wild beasts in a deep solitude of spirit and will'. Only after 'long centuries of barbarism' are they eventually 'brutalized' back into that elementary common sense of 'the sheer necessities of life' which forces them to

become 'sociable and . . . [return] to the primitive simplicity of the first world of peoples'.¹⁵⁷ Second, it follows that a long process of 'recourse', through the three ages, would have to be undergone before a properly worthy 'human' civilisation were regained.

Stopping the rot?

This focuses attention on what Vico thought of his own times. For Vico, man can do nothing to frustrate the 'force' of providence – but neither should he want to, since it is solely benevolent. It ensures 'society'. It does not decree its corruption. But can man do anything to *supplement* the help of 'providence'? Translated into Vico's own times, this means asking whether men can prevent a collapse of their society and institutions, which promise so much in this 'age of men'.

We have seen Vico's sketch of the historical possibilities. Once that decline endangers society's very fabric, it can be stopped by the strong hand of a new 'monarch', able to restrain the corruption. The only other possibility – conquest and rule by another nation – would hardly be *deliberately engineered* by a people to maintain its culture. The only other political development Vico mentions – but not in connection with salvaging a corrupt nation – is the formation of 'leagues, whether perpetual or temporary' between sovereign powers. But rather than see such unions as progressive (we might think of contemporary enthusiasts for European political union), he sees them as akin to new 'aristocratic states into which enter the anxious suspicions characteristic of aristocracies', and interprets them as a *regression* analogous to the first 'aristocracies of the fathers'.¹⁵⁸

This said, however, we must recognise that Vico says little forward-looking or judgemental about his contemporary European political scene. Possibly circumspect, it is, however, certain that his focus was elsewhere than on the immediacies of European political affairs. Thus in response to our large query as to whether men themselves can do anything to maintain and promote the 'age of men', it is not surprising he offers no immediate political prescriptions. Rather, his focus was the much longer one of the *philosopher of history*, contemplating in his case huge, holistic, cultural shifts in human history. He thought European nations had comparatively recently embarked on a second 'human' age, and given the epochal time-scale he finds exhibited in previous fundamental historical change, contemporary political comment is not part of Vico's remit.

But he is prescriptive in longer-distance terms – and characteristically, his messages for his time's future revolve around that very notion of 'mentality' so prominent in his holistic historical thinking. Given he clearly judges 'the age of men' as superior to other 'ages' (despite his otherwise markedly impartial 'cultural relativism'), and that its decline is *not* providentially decreed, a case can be made that Vico has two prescriptions – one more concerned to *stave off* those (human) causes for decline, the other to *promote* the second 'human age' to new heights.

Regarding the former, we noted Vico's prognosis for the way 'the age of men' tends towards decline as men deteriorate from being 'benign' to being 'delicate', then 'dissolute', leading them to 'finally go mad and waste their substance'. Although Vico does not comment on whether this disintegration of a people's mentality can be halted, his obvious respect for much of the (prior) 'heroic' mentality provides food for thought. Frequently Vico writes admiringly of the bravery, honesty, and straightforwardness of the 'heroic' outlook on life. It is true they also behaved with 'barbarity', consulting their feelings rather than their (undeveloped) 'reason', but Vico is more often understanding than condemnatory, because of their perceptive sense of reality. One senses it is precisely this grip on reality which Vico fears can get lost, eventually, in the 'age of men', and that he sometimes uses his notion of the 'heroic' mentality as a stick with which to beat its vices – vices linked above all to the disappearing of 'common sense'. By analogy, many parents today gladly send off their teenage child to be enlightened, informed, and fulfilled by what the world of education and work can offer – but also in the fervent hope that amidst all the marvels and distractions the child will hang on to its common sense. Quite what Vico would have made of the present state of European and North American 'civilisation' is of course beyond us, but it is interesting to compare it with some of the 'heroic' features Vico asks us to compare even to *his* times! 'Luxury, refinement, and ease were quite unknown':¹⁵⁹ 'the [heroic] education of the young was severe, harsh, and cruel, . . . whereas the indulgences with which we now treat our young children produces all the tenderness of our [modern] natures'.¹⁶⁰ Another example is irresistible in the light of Vico's own observation that his wife was not really interested in house-keeping and child-minding. Is it perhaps *ruefully* that he remarks that in 'heroic' times, 'children [were] acquired and wives saved for the benefit of their husbands and fathers; not, as nowadays, just the contrary'?!¹⁶¹

In short, a case can be made for saying Vico thinks that if his 'age of men' is to progress rather than decline, it might need 'stiffening up' with some of the 'heroic' attitudes. He would be the last, of course, to suggest one could simply transplant the heroic mentality into the 'age of men' – but he asks us not only to understand it better, but to respect it more and possibly even learn something from it. Some of the flavour of this is apparent in an oration Vico gave to incoming students to the Royal Academy of Naples in 1732. Entitled *On the Heroic Mind*, amongst other things Vico tells the students not to study in order to become rich or powerful, nor for the narrow purpose of love of learning for its own sake. Rather, he enjoins them to be 'heroic' and raise their eyes to the purpose of 'lay[ing] foundations of learning and wisdom for the blessing of the human race'.¹⁶² Significantly, he urges students to an *interdisciplinary* approach, and not to be deterred from being ambitious by 'scholars with petty minds'.¹⁶³ 'This world is still young . . . countless possibilities still remain, so 'apply yourselves to your studies with heroic mind. . . . Prove yourselves to be heroes by enriching the human race with further giant benefits'.¹⁶⁴

A new age?

These passages provide a useful transition to that other aspect of our query as to Vico's thoughts on his second 'age of men' – namely, in addition to preserving it from corruption, can men go further and actually *promote* its possibilities? The tone of the above Oration suggests they can – interestingly enough, *if* they adopt an 'heroic' spirit. But a more substantial case has been made by those who find a positive message embedded in the internal logic of the *New Science* itself, and perhaps occasionally hinted at explicitly by Vico. This is nothing less than the view that Vico looked to a *higher* phase of 'the age of men' – maybe a new age altogether – in which societies would be in conscious control of their own development. Just as the natural sciences' discovery of the laws of the physical world enabled its increasing manipulation to the betterment of mankind, so (it is suggested) Vico thought his 'new science' offered men the opportunity to increasingly control their own societies through the new understanding of the *social* world it offered. After all, it is suggested, Vico is the very one who insists that *men make* their own history, and that because of this the workings of the social world can be *understood* (better, even, than the natural world). It is true that, up to now, 'providence' has seen to it that societies exist in some form or other, often at variance with the uncoordinated, uninformed designs of men. But now Vico has uncovered the logic 'providence' has implanted into human affairs. The scene is set, then, for a step advance by humanity towards at last being in control of its future through the conscious determination of its present.

Such is the interpretation put upon Vico's *New Science* by some, particularly those intellectual Marxists who see in the relationship Vico proposes between 'philosophy' and 'philology' a precursing of Marx's notion of 'revolutionary praxis'.¹⁶⁵ The Marxian notion of a 'pre-history', in which men not in control of the very societies *they* make, is to be succeeded by 'human history' where they are at last able consciously to create themselves, looms large here. As one commentator puts it (reminding us of Vico's equating 'poet' with 'creator' or 'maker'), 'it is precisely because the first men were poets and hence *made* their world that this world can be *known*. As a science of "the principles of humanity" the *New Science* is a science of creativity, of man *qua* creator'.¹⁶⁶

Although these are speculations both about Vico's real intentions and the meanings (intended or not) which can be extracted from his work, they may not be wild. Yet problems remain. For example, it is not clear from *his* 'science' whether 'human nature' can *itself* be subject to such conscious re-formation. Some allege there are *two* 'human natures' in Vico – that which forms the unchangeable substratum of humanity at any time (be they 'gods', 'heroes', or 'men'), and the 'nature' which changes from one 'age' to another, culminating in the 'human' nature of people in the 'age of men'. If a correct reading of Vico, this would presumably impose limitations on man's capacity to re-fashion *himself*. A related problem is whether Vico believed that man can ever 'know' his mind. It has been argued that the earlier Vico believed man could *not*, since even though man 'makes'

his own history, he does not ‘make’ his own mind – but that he altered his view by the *New Science*, implying that in understanding previous minds (mentalities) we retrace the making of our own minds – i.e., as insightful ‘new scientists’ we *do* ‘make’ our minds.¹⁶⁷

These are but some of the disputed meanings extracted from Vico’s logic, and if nothing else, such weighty themes demonstrate the continued appeal of Vichian studies. But the other issue is what Vico himself *intended* to mean about the prospects for the (second) ‘age of men’, with its larger implications for his entire philosophy of history. This takes us back to the text itself – but no longer, I suggest, to its internal details. Rather, we will answer our query better by considering the rationale of the *New Science* as a whole. Why did he write it? We know there were earlier ‘versions’ before the first edition of 1725, and that for the rest of his life he kept on revising it. What is the overall point he wanted to make?

It is clear Vico thought he had something of great importance to communicate; namely, nothing less than the ‘logic’ of human historical development – and that this ‘new science’ at last provided the answers to those numerous fundamental questions about society, justice, human nature, morality, and government which philosophers, historians, and political theorists had grappled with over the millennia. But he did not write his book solely to enlighten others. We have already found him dismissing study solely for the sake of learning. He clearly believed that the knowledge conveyed by his ‘science’ (confessedly incomplete) could not only solve matters which had puzzled others for centuries, but that it should have *practical implications* for the way people handled their societies and civil institutions in the future. Quite what they were he did not spell out in any detail – but perhaps he could not be expected to. Rather, it seems he hoped for the kind of large-scale, long-term improvement in the social, political, and cultural affairs of human-beings which he thought the approach of scientists such as his beloved Bacon presaged for their physical, economic, and medical welfare.

If this estimation of Vico’s intentions is correct, it would seem wrong to propose that his theory consigns nations to some inevitable deterioration as they progress further into the ‘age of men’, ultimately to start their civilisations again in a ‘recourse’ of their previous developmental stages. The pessimism underlying such a prospect sits uneasily with the optimistic sense of discovery and intellectual urgency Vico conveys in his *New Science*. Rather, his commitment to his project is more suggestive of the notion that he meant his theory of history to be a *transformative* ‘science’ or ‘philosophy’ which could not only prevent a ceaseless recourse of cycles of human history, but also help fulfill the promise inherent in the ‘human’ age of reason. As such, his philosophy of history assumes an ambition as vast as its scope – a feature, it would seem, endemic to ‘philosophy of history’ itself as we now proceed to those subsequent thinkers who also put their minds to it.

Summary comments

Nowadays, students and scholars will find a wealth of literature exploring whichever parts of the labyrinth of Vico's thinking interests them. Accordingly, it seems appropriate to limit our comments to 'seeing the wood for the trees' – and this, I suggest, returns us to Vico's *method*.

Essentially, Vico re-presented the course of human history in terms of its *origins*, and in doing so believed he made it 'make sense'. He devised an account of the very 'principles' which drive historical development and inform it with 'meaning' (in the sense that it is not arbitrary, but neither the product of human planning) – and he did this by claiming to have found an 'ideal' (or *model*) 'story' or 'course' through which all nations traverse (other things being equal).

Prior to examining the notion of a model 'story', in the first instance this draws our attention to the 'logic' of *individual* 'stories' taken by themselves. For Vico, the history of any 'nation' is not a random collection of disconnected 'ages' happening to succeed each, and neither does it endlessly elaborate around its starting point. Rather, it is comprised of remarkably different cultures corresponding to remarkably different 'ages', and yet a fundamental *continuity* is maintained precisely *through* this process of *change*.

This is the logic of 'stories', for any proper 'story' must feed on change, since if nothing new happens after the first event there is no story to be told. But equally, the different events in the story must emerge from each other, otherwise again there would be no story, but simply a random collection of different anecdotes. Thus it is that a story is a *single* thing, an identity, essentially constituted through *change*.

Further, a story is not knowable via logical deduction. Nor is it knowable via understanding each event discretely. Rather, the way we grasp the story is neither through rationalism nor empiricism, but through an *historical* consciousness which, in tracing a thing's continuity through change, understands its present dispensation in terms of where it came from.

So far, the analogy with the logic of 'stories' is sound enough in following Vico. Particularly apt is that feature whereby outcomes are the result, not of a necessary sequence of cause and effect, but of the 'free', yet intelligible, responses of human beings to the circumstances they encounter.

Now, if the story is *fiction* (e.g., a novel) the outcome at any point will have been *designed* by the *author* in such a way that it 'makes sense' by 'following' from the preceding events. Yet Vico, of course, does not believe his (hi)stories of 'nations' are fiction. The other kind of story is the factual 'story' – that is, history, where the historian is the discoverer, not the *author* or *inventor* of the 'story'.

Put in this way, we may ask how Vico stands in relation to these alternatives? It is clear he does not see the course of history as determined through 'scientific' cause and effect. Rather, it displays the logic of a 'story'. But it is not a story invented by him – i.e., it is not fiction. But neither does he present its intelligibility as an historian would – i.e., as simply inherent in the course of events, without the need

for an 'author' designing it. Vico insists there is an 'author', or a 'mind', designing the 'story' – and it is understandable that he should therefore call the author 'God', for what other option could there be?

But *why* does Vico insist there is an 'author'? Why not simply say that, as an historian, he has found an intelligibility in what might otherwise appear a random succession of events? Why does he need 'God'?

The answer to this, I suggest, rests on the fact that Vico does not understand himself to be constructing some 'universal' history of humankind, in which the latter is the subject of *one single, ongoing* story. As we have seen, (unlike a *fictional* story), any *single* factual story does not need, or point to, a designer behind it. Had the 'course' each 'nation' underwent simply been different in each case, then one could present each 'story' as an historian, without the need to introduce deliberate design – i.e., 'God'. But what so excited Vico was his 'discovery' that, despite contingent differences, each 'nation' went through the same basic story, independently – in other words, that mankind's past consisted of *numerous* versions of the *same* story. And one can only wonder at how excited he must have been to 'discover' that this same basic story is not only to be found in different cultures, but has even *repeated* itself in a 'recourse'! This could not be chance.

Thus, had Vico only studied the history of the Roman people he might have found most of what he *did* find, but still not need 'God' to make the development of its society intelligible. But because he found the same basic 'story' in Greece and elsewhere (and 'recoursed' in Europe since the demise of the Western Roman Empire), the only way *he* could account for this correlation was the presence of mind, design, or 'God'. That Vico should propose, and mean, this is understandable – for he had stumbled on something then unknown in the intellectual world he inherited; what we call 'social science'.

Today's social sciences employ a variety of methods to understand the social world (Vico's 'the world of nations') – and the concept of *correlation* is important amongst them, inspiring the 'science' of *statistics* to invent the basic concept of '*significant correlation*', which discovers predictable regularities amidst the diverse social world. Also, in addition to a substratum of *historical* knowledge, social scientists employ quantitative analysis in graphs, flow charts, and logical models.

But even now, they still debate their fundamental methodology, and are subject to outside scrutiny on the same count. Is 'social science' the same as natural science? If not, should it aspire to be? Is 'social science' more than, or different to, *history*? What methods should social science employ? What is the epistemological status of its disciplines (i.e., their 'truth' value)? In short, *how* we study the social world remains problematic for some.

Now it is highly unlikely Vico had any concept of a 'significant correlation', let alone of how to calculate it. Also, many have commented on the substantial neglect of *economics* in Vico's otherwise holistic approach to understanding societies. Yet the 'sciences' of statistics and economics, let alone other 'social sciences', were hardly developed in Vico's day, nor the thinking that underlay them.

It is in this context that Vico nevertheless stumbled upon the basic problems of the 'logic' of 'social science' – he intuited that the study of the social world could not rest solely on history ('philology'), nor model itself on the methodology of the natural sciences ('science/philosophy'). Some new way (his 'new science') needed to be forged to properly understand the social world, and having worked towards it, he 'discovered' that the social world *must* be intelligible because both historically and holistically it exhibited 'pattern' or 'regularity'.

Many of today's social scientists, it seems, are happy enough to find such 'regularities' without asking *why* they occur, (e.g., the correlation between crime and poverty) whilst others seek to *explain* them, but often through what might be regarded as the blind alley of searching for what 'correlates' to the very correlation under scrutiny! But for Vico, in the absence of our idea of 'social science', his discovery of a pattern, or 'model story', would have been enough to evidence 'design' or 'authorship', and thus point to 'God'. That he also found the model story to be one which *benefited* mankind only served to encourage this view, to the point where he claimed his work provided an actual *proof* of the existence of God – a view as foreign to the 'social sciences' today as it felt natural then to Vico. We may only ask; although Vico's reliance on 'God' ('providence') in 'making sense' of the nature and history of human societies is out-dated, is the logic of 'significant correlations' any better? Presumably, when something is 'significant' it thus *signifies* something? Yet the logic of social science seems reluctant to engage in what Vico called the art of 'divination' to find out what.