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## Vico's New Science of Interpretation: Beyond Philosophical Hermeneutics and the Hermeneutics of Suspicion

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VICO & THE NEW SCIENCE OF INTERPRETATION  
 BEYOND PHILOSOPHICAL HERMENEUTICS & THE  
 HERMENEUTICS OF SUSPICION

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The tendency among contemporary intellectual historians to project the prejudices of their own society onto their subjects is not always a reflection of unconscious conceit. A case in point is the problem one encounters when trying to fathom what Jules Michelet once famously referred to as the “petit pandemonium” of Giambattista Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* (Michelet 1843, 4-5).<sup>1</sup> Finding meaningful coherence in the often confusing architectonic of this *baroque* masterpiece has perforce compelled commentators to read into it the ideas of their own age. As Vico himself observed, “whenever men can form no idea of distant and unknown things, they judge them by what is familiar and at hand” (Vico 1968, par. 122-23). This “axiom” of interpretation, he believed, “points to the inexhaustible source of all the errors about the principles of humanity” evinced by the enlightened natural law theorists of his day, who sought to interpret the barbarian peoples of antiquity as if they were civilized philosophers (122-23).

Yet if we accept the argument advanced by Hans-Georg Gadamer (Gadamer 1993), the mediation of past and present that occurs whenever commentators judge the past from what is familiar at hand need not obstruct understanding and in fact may be necessary for it. The legitimate demand to understand an original thinker of Vico’s stature *exactly* as his contemporaries understood him—or as he understood himself—can at best be partially realized. For a literal replication of Vico’s understanding—replete with all its parochial anachronisms—would simply render him meaningless to contemporary readers. What Vico means by *scienza* and *coscienza*, to take one obvious example, does not

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1 All references to Vico’s *Scienza Nuova* will be taken from the numbered paragraphs of *The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Vico 1968).

exactly correspond to the English expressions “science” and “knowledge.” The Italian words with their Latin roots imply a kind of familiarity that seems far removed from our more modern concept of a technical expertise. And then there is Vico’s own peculiar usage of these words, which recall Scholastic and Cartesian philosophical antecedents.

Given the futility of trying to understand him exactly as his contemporaries understood him, it is hardly surprising that contemporary commentators have interpreted Vico in light of the pressing issues confronting today’s philosophers and historians. Thus, in what has now become a standard tribute paid to Vico, Ernst Cassirer and, more recently, Isaiah Berlin have argued that Vico’s single greatest accomplishment was to have seen (however dimly) what later philosophers and historians writing over a century later would fully comprehend: that historical knowledge possesses an interpretative logic that is radically different from the causal-explanatory logic definitive of natural scientific knowledge.<sup>2</sup>

Assuming that Cassirer and Berlin are right, it is imperative that hermeneuticists who follow in the steps of Vico understand what kind of interpretative logic he may have had in mind. Vico refers to a kind of self-knowledge (*reflessione*) that is very different from the Cartesian inspection of the mind, conceived as a method for knowing *physical nature* (Vico 1968, par. 236). In his opinion, the only true knowledge we can obtain while “reflecting within the modifications of our very own mind” (*dentro le modificazione della medesima nostra mente umana*—par. 331) is knowledge of the modifications of *human* nature, conceived as a relatively invariant process of historical evolution and devolution.

Why does he say this? What is special about reflecting on the past that sets it apart from mathematical and conceptual reflection? Vico provides us with many clues about what he means by ‘mind’ (*mente*), ‘reflection’ (*reflessione*), ‘common sense’ (*sensus communis*), ‘imagination’ (*fantasia*), and other terms he uses that have a bearing on our query. For his own part, Berlin thinks that the kind of ‘understanding’ (*verstehen*) we find in Vico is broadly equivalent to the kind of *Empfindung* and *Nacherleben* (sympathetic and imaginative identification with and

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2 Ernst Cassirer, e.g., argued that “the real value in Vico’s philosophy of history’ ... and what he did see clearly, and what he defended against Descartes, was the methodological uniqueness and distinctive value of historical knowledge” (Cassirer 1960, 52). Cf. also Berlin 1976.

experiential reconstruction of) cultural worldviews of the sort later expounded by Wilhelm Dilthey and other historicists.<sup>3</sup>

However promising this conjecture might be for answering our question, Gadamer's criticism of Berlin's type of historicism suggests that Berlin might be mistaken. For if Gadamer is right, historicism tacitly invokes precisely the kind of Cartesian reflection that Vico himself repudiates (Gadamer 1993, 187-91, 220-37). How then, can we reconcile Berlin's interpretation of Vico—with its implication that Vico was an historicist *avant la lettre* and (accepting Gadamer's view of historicism) a "closet" Cartesian—with the near universal opinion that Vico's notion of historical understanding is *un*-Cartesian?

I argue that we cannot accept Berlin's interpretation, and furthermore that Vico must have had in mind a different notion of *verstehen* possessing a different logic of reflection. The most obvious candidate for such an alternative notion of historical understanding is the dialectical (or rather, dialogical) one proposed by none other than Gadamer himself. Indeed, it is Gadamer who draws our attention to aspects of Vico's account of *verstehen* that anticipate such a notion of historical understanding. These aspects chiefly revolve around the importance of common sense and rhetoric in providing (in the precise sense intended by Martin Heidegger) an *ontological*; viz., *pre-methodological*, grounding for mutual understanding (Gadamer 1993, 19-24). In Gadamer's opinion, Vico's awareness of this ontological grounding is manifested in his belief that practical judgment (Aristotelian *phronesis*) is rooted in a *pre-rational* common sense, or intuitive certainty of what is just and good, that is conditioned by both acculturation in shared tradition and the unique circumstances of the agent's situation; and it is precisely this mode of historical being that calls forth a dialogical interplay between tradition and the agent's situation.

Yet, despite anticipating a dialogical model of *verstehen* in his discussion of common sense and rhetoric, Vico did end up embracing a more historicist interpretation one. As Gadamer notes, in explaining

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3 Although Berlin notes that Vico "does not account for our knowledge of other selves—individual or collective, living or dead—by invoking the language of empathy, or analogical reasoning, or intuition or participation in the unity of the World Spirit" (Berlin 1976, 27), he elsewhere notes that Johann Gottfried Herder's description of the historical sense with "sympathetic insight – one's capacity for *einfühlen* ('empathy') ... bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Vico" (187).

how historical understanding is possible, Vico conceives the relationship between agent and history along the model of technical making (Aristotelian *techne*). In Gadamer's opinion, this mistaken view about the relationship between the agent and his historical "substance" commits Vico to a kind of subjective idealism; the historian is understood as methodically re-creating a past she has already created, simply in virtue of participating in one and the same universal history-creating humanity. Thus, for Vico as for Dilthey, *verstehen* designates not an ontological mode of human existing underlying all knowledge and action whatsoever, but a distinct type of historical knowing that still retains a vestigial link to rational, Cartesian methodology (Gadamer 1993, 230, 276, 373, 572).<sup>4</sup>

Can we then not say that Vico is proposing an anti-Cartesian account of historical knowledge? Yes and no. Berlin's view that Vico's account implies empathetic identification correctly identifies one aspect of a *complex* ontological (dialectical) and methodological account of *verstehen*, namely the importance of fantasy (imagination) in creating *analogies* ("correspondences") between what are otherwise dissimilar worldviews and, more important, between human history and natural process (Berlin 1976, 73).<sup>5</sup> He is also right in noting that one such analogy links the "modifications" of our own minds as we grow from childhood to maturity to the "modifications" of the human spirit as it grows from childlike barbarity to rational civility (45). Following Max Fisch (Vico 1968, A4, xxiii), I would go even further in arguing that Vico's historical hermeneutics appeals to a structural analogy between phylogenetic and ontogenetic development that anticipates the "hermeneutics of suspicion" advocated by Jürgen Habermas.

This evolutionary scheme is clearly beholden to rational insight and generalizing method, and indeed supports the view that reason is the crowning achievement of human evolution. At the same time, there are ontological aspects of Vico's critical hermeneutics that qualify his belief

4 The view I am defending here—that Vico's rejection of Cartesian (or analytic) rationality does not entail a rejection of rational methodology as such—has recently been defended by Leon Pompa. I differ from Pompa, however, in arguing that, for Vico, the kind of rational methodology intrinsic to historical knowledge is continuous with the non-analytic (or synthetic) logic of poetic imagination, which is pre-rational in its origins. Cf. Pompa 1990.

5 For a good discussion of the importance of rhetoric, judgment, imagination, and analogical reasoning in Vico's new science, see Schaeffer 1990.

in the progressive nature of this development. Although Vico intends to unmask the ideological misapprehension that worships the past and extols the timeless authority of tradition—a conservative bias that Habermas and other critical theorists ascribe to Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics—he also intends to unmask the unreasonable pretensions of any critical reason that aspires to replace traditional authority.

On one hand, he clearly believes that particular religions, institutions, and traditions are not timeless instantiations of eternal verities, but are human fictions that reflect the historically conditioned biases of particular types of human beings and of the particular political and economic classes to which they belong. Only in the last stage of social evolution, what Vico calls the Age of Men, can it be said that such religions, institutions, and traditions take on a rational form that favors everyone’s universal interests equally and impartially. On the other hand—anticipating Rousseau, Nietzsche, and Weber—Vico holds that too much civilization produces moral decay. By demanding that every belief be analyzable into clear and distinct ideas possessing demonstrable certainty, hyperbolic reason undermines faith in traditional authority. Subsequent skepticism regarding the intrinsic worth of moral values encourages an instrumental rationalism oriented exclusively toward the efficient pursuit of individual self-interest, the egoism of which dissolves society into that “war of all against all” so famously depicted by Hobbes. As noted above, Vico’s own construal of history as a Promethean act of instrumental self-creation does not entirely escape this “dialectic of enlightenment,” as Adorno and Horkheimer famously dubbed it. To the extent that it does, however, Vichean hermeneutics endeavors to show how even rational criticism must accept certain traditional authorities unquestioningly, on faith.

Vico principally has in mind faith in divine providence (that everything historical can be seen as fulfilling a higher meaning and purpose). Of course, for modern-day secular thinkers like myself, one might plausibly interpret Vico’s appeal to providence as an appeal to a logic of development imminent within all incipient languages and cultures whose beneficent effects become apparent to us from the vantage point of enlightened hindsight. Yet, regardless of how we understand Vichean providence, it is clear from Vico’s text that critical reason cannot be the highest or final epistemic authority (as Descartes would have it) but must itself rest on the timeless and eternal (and hence quasi-divine) authority of language and tradition (as Gadamer’s philosophical hermeneutics would have it).

For it is this background of potential meaningfulness that guides all forms of understanding, historical or natural scientific.

## 1. Vico and Cartesianism

A convenient way to begin our examination of Vico's new science of historical understanding is by recalling his famous criticism of Descartes' criterion of truth and its elevation of the causal-explanatory methodology of the physical sciences as the *via regia* to knowledge. In his Seventh Inaugural Address (1708) entitled *De Nostris Temporis Studiorum Ratione* ('Of The Study Methods of Our Time'), Vico had argued that physical science is not the demonstrable science that Descartes thought it was, because if it were, then we – not God – would have made the laws of physics. By contrast, geometry is demonstrable precisely because it is we who have stipulated its definitions and axioms (Vico 1965, 23).

Vico's astonishing claim owes much to the venerable medieval doctrine that knowledge is "per causas." . For Augustine and Aquinas, God's knowledge is of this sort: because He created the world, He knows its intrinsic purposes. Invoking the Renaissance analogy between God and Man, Vico attributes a similar knowledge to human beings, but only with regard to what *they* create. God—not man—is the creator of physical nature. Human beings, therefore, can only demonstrate *how* – not *why* – the laws of physics function the way they do. Experimental physics thus yields at best probabilistic knowledge. It is entirely different with geometry, since we have stipulated the conventions which define the operations and meanings of mathematical entities.

Two years later (1710), in *De Antequissima*, Vico announced his famous doctrine that "the true and the made are convertible" (*verum et factum convertuntur*). However, he had not yet established—as Hobbes in fact had already done—that demonstrable knowledge can be applied to the real (human) world. Geometry did not apply to this world, in his opinion, since it only articulated distinctions fabricated by the human mind that are valid, *stricto sensu*, only in the inner world of ideas. Physics remained the most reliable "knowledge" of the real world, which in his opinion was highly fallible, albeit not as fallible as history. Having not attained the level of nomothetic explanation, history amounted to little more than what (as he put it in his Third Inaugural Lecture of 1702) "a potter, a cook, a cobbler, a summoner, an auctioneer in Rome" might provide a philologist studying Roman artifacts (Vico 1911, 35

ff.). This dismissive attitude toward history as an arbitrary collection of particular facts—so reminiscent of Descartes' remark that historians of Rome know little more than Cicero's servant girl—would later be abandoned by Vico in 1712. However, by now he had already jettisoned the Cartesian criterion of truth, based on the perception of clear and distinct ideas, as being too subjective and prone to error. More important, he had begun to elevate common sense certainty (*il certo*) of the world as directly lived and experienced by people in their everyday practical lives to a level of knowledge beyond the mere subjective opinion to which Descartes had apparently consigned it.

Elaborating the radical change in Vico's thinking announced in the *Diritto Universale* (1720), the first edition of Vico's *Scienza Nuova* (1725) recombines these ideas in startling fashion. Historical science is now elevated above deductive knowledge of the mathematical type and inductive knowledge of the natural scientific type. In essence, historical knowledge combines the virtues of these separate modes of knowledge without their attendant defects. Like mathematical knowledge, historical knowledge is about something human beings have made – the languages, institutions, and actions that make up social reality – and hence can be known *per causas* and with a degree of certainty aspiring to demonstrable truth. Like natural scientific knowledge, it is about a factual reality that transcends subjective experience and mere conceptual analysis. To cite Vico:

As geometry, when it constructs the world of quantity out of its elements, or contemplates that world, is creating it for itself, just so does our Science [create for itself the world of nations], but with a reality greater by so much as the institutions having to do with human affairs are more real than points, lines surfaces, and figures are (Vico 1968, par. 349).

In short, because we ourselves have injected our own purposes into the stuff of history, and because even what we have unintentionally created in history—languages, customs, traditions, etc.—is meaningful to us from within our own mental and spiritual life—we can understand history as something intrinsically intelligible in a way that we cannot understand physical nature. To paraphrase Berlin, I may have some knowledge of how trees and ants look and behave based upon external observation, but I cannot know what it means to *be* them in the same



way I know—from the inside, as it were—what it means to *be* a human being (Berlin 1976, 23).

## 2. The Possibility of Historical Understanding: Combining Philosophical Reason and Aesthetic Imagination in the New Science

What is this new kind of historical self-knowledge that Vico is supposedly proposing? Berlin thinks he has an answer. Referring Vichean *reflissione* (self-knowledge) to the operations of *fantasia* (imagination), he submits that the kind of “imaginative reconstruction” characteristic of Vico’s conception of historical understanding amounts to a kind of mental transposition into and identification with the otherwise alien worldviews of past epochs. In short, like later historicists in the German Romantic school, Vico is said to believe that present and past epochs are radically incommensurable, incomparable, and even untranslatable—so much so that Vico would vehemently deny Leonardo Bruni’s claim, so typical of Renaissance humanism, that “Nothing is said in Greek that cannot be said in Latin” (Berlin 1976, 139).

Why attribute to Vico such an extreme—and implausible—view of incommensurability? The view is patently self-defeating, since one would have had to translate Greek and Latin into one’s own language in order to know that they *were* incommensurable (untranslatable), thereby rendering them commensurable (Davidson 1984). Berlin himself offers scant evidence to show that Vico actually believed that cultural worldviews were this incommensurable. Vico’s adamant refusal to accept the notion of a timeless human nature replete with a timeless natural law to govern it is not evidence that he held this radical view. For the *New Science* is very much written from the standpoint of a jurist who *did* believe in a natural law common to all peoples—albeit a law of historical evolution. To understand the present as an outgrowth of the past amounts to understanding the past as an anticipation of the present. This way of translating the *mente* of the past into the *mente* of the present preserves rather than obliterates the difference between past and present. The natural law theorists of Vico’s day, however, did not translate the past into the present: rather, they simply projected the present onto the past. To cite Vico:

The three princes of this doctrine [of natural law—D.I.], Hugo Grotius, John Selden, and Samuel Pufendorf, should have taken their start from the beginnings of the *gentes*, where their subject matter begins. But all three of them err together in this respect, by beginning in the middle; that is, with the latest times of the civilized nations (and thus with men enlightened by fully natural reason), from which the philosophers emerged and rose to meditation of a perfect idea of justice (Vico 1968, par. 394).

In contrast to the static notion of human nature appealed to by the natural law doctrines of his time, Vico's "natural law of *gentes*" rests upon a dynamic conception of human nature and of human nations (*gentes*). Both terms—*natura* and *genti* (the Italian plural of *gente*, whose Latin roots are *gens* and the plural nominative *gentes*)—refer to birth (*natio*/*nascimento*) and genesis, or growth and development (Vico 1968, par. 147).

By 'nation' Vico means a distinctive group of people who descend from common institutional origins peculiar to themselves, viz., institutions that are not shared by others and which develop according to an internal logic impelled mainly by internal class struggles. Vico himself restricts his study to the "gentile" nations for whom, unlike the Jews, the truth of God's providence was not revealed once and for all and who must therefore historically evolve toward this ideal state without ever completely attaining it (Vico 1968, par. 167, 365). The descendants of Ham and Japheth and the non-Hebraic descendants of Shem are described by Vico as having lost all language and civil institution and being reduced to utter bestiality (par. 369). The rebirth of these giant *bestioni* and *ferini* into a nation—or rather, "*un mondo delle nazioni*"—begins with their providential discovery of matrimonial and religious institutions. From that point on, each nation runs through three successive ages, or stages of natural genesis: that of Gods, that of heroes, and that of men. Only in the last age do human beings *approximately* achieve (for however fleeting a moment) the "rational humanity" that is "the true and proper nature of man" (par. 973), namely of "human reason fully developed" and reconciled to faith (par. 326, 924). Because this end is an ideal that is never completely achieved, the natural (although perhaps not inevitable) fate of most nations is dissolution and return to state of barbarism, whence the cycle of ages begins anew, albeit at a higher level.<sup>6</sup>

6 Vico believes that, following the flourishing of enlightenment during late antiquity and continuing through the fall of the Roman Empire, a new

Vico's pointed reference to a "natural law of gentes" common to all gentile peoples thus refers primarily to the fact that all peoples run through one and the same universal course of historical evolution and that all peoples, regardless of their peculiar differences, preserve and maintain themselves through institutions of marriage, burial, and religion (Vico 1968, par. 332-33). The important point to note in this adumbration is that, according to Vico, these universals of human society did not emerge through cultural diffusion or communication between different peoples, since the latter are "separately founded because remote from each other in time and space" (par. 332-33). Therefore, "the common ground of truth" underlying "uniform ideas originating among entire peoples unknown to each other" (par. 144) must be divine providence.

I will have more to say below about the importance of providence in Vico's new science. Presently it suffices to note the severity of the problem Vico has set for himself. Different nations may share a common natural law of development, but such a common ground of understanding will not aid in understanding earlier stages of human understanding that are so radically different from our enlightened nature. As Vico himself puts it:

To discover the way in which this first human thinking arose in the gentile world, we encountered exasperating difficulties which have cost us the research of a good twenty years. [We had] to descend from these human and refined natures of ours to those quite wild and savage natures, which we cannot at all imagine and can comprehend with only great effort (par. 338).

In the passage cited above, Vico affirms that pre-civilized ways of understanding can be understood—the new science is proof of this—albeit with great difficulty. This affirmation alone suffices to rebut the incommensurability thesis attributed to him by Berlin. Still, the problem remains how radically different ways of understanding can be made commensurable from the vantage point of the historian. The key to bridging this gap—and the key to understanding what kind of historical understanding Vico may have had in mind—resides in his belief that

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Christian era inaugurates the cycle of ages once more. Unlike its Egyptian and Greco-Roman precursors, this *ricorso* of historical development begins with a barbarism (the Dark Ages) that inherits a superior poetic wisdom, in that the God it worships is more human and morally superior than the pagan Gods of antiquity.

all modern languages (viz., rationalized prose languages whose clear and distinct conceptual distinctions between words facilitate useful communication) contain residues of their poetic past: “We find that the principles of these origins both of languages and of letters lie in the fact that the early gentile peoples, by a demonstrated necessity of nature, were poets who spoke in poetic characters” (par. 34).

The poetic wisdom of the divine and heroic ages of humanity consisted of creating the symbols (at first hieroglyphics) and metaphors out of which human institutions and social relationships are created. In Vico’s opinion, these symbols and images worked through a logic that bore some resemblance to what Aristotle called the *ars topica*, the art of hitting upon common places (*topoi*), or analogies for fashioning the most rhetorically convincing (i.e., probable) explanation for some fact. Rather than using cause and effect to explain things, primitive human beings used resemblance. Things that belonged together by resemblance also had magical affinities with respect to their properties that could be used to explain their behavior.

For Vico, primitive humans rely upon a kind of “corporeal imagination” to invent “sensory topics,” or “imaginative universals.” Such humans naturally take what is most familiar to themselves—their own bodies and its feelings—as a reference point for inventing fables about nature, whose properties seem to resemble the properties of human action. To illustrate such anthropomorphizing: Vico notes how startling sounds such as thunder would be construed “in the first place” as a human-like grumble or shout—the voice of the sky but also of God, or Jove (Vico 1968, par. 377). The fright and subsequent flight to cave shelters—the origination of all settled, civilized life, according to Vico—was the first instinctual reflex of a mortal fear of God. Thus was born religion. By further analogical reasoning these early cave dwellers later interpreted the fact of settled life as something divinely sanctioned. Here begins the genesis of an heroic ethos that would explicitly link settled property with noble, divine-like authority and power. Presuming themselves to be descended from the Gods and the first race of mortal heroes, these nobles imagined themselves to be—their mortality in this world notwithstanding—as divine-like and immortal as the eternal and unchanging natural deities governing them. Hence they would naturally seek to guarantee their eternal patrimony through marriage laws establishing patrilineal descent. Likewise, they would establish burial laws and rites as further proof of their immortality.

Thus, Vico concludes that it is through a poetic logic of metaphorical association—not through an analytic logic of abstract reasoning—that the three fundamental institutions of religion, marriage, and burial that ground the possibility of law, morality, and society are instituted. As he notes, heroic emblems attest to this primitive amalgamation by analogically condensing religion, property, and legal authority into a single symbol or metaphor. The heraldic device of an oak tree, for instance, refers to noble descent (symbolized by fixed roots), settled property (symbolized by the shelter of a forest canopy), religion (symbolized by the binding together, or *religio*, of branches around a single trunk), and law (symbolized by an acorn, whose archaic Latin root is related to both God and law, or *ius*).

To return to our original query, the problem of historical understanding amounts to bridging the gap separating the modern historian's rational understanding, which is informed by the clear conceptual distinctions operant within ordinary speech, from the primitive agent's poetic understanding, which is informed by the collapsing of such distinctions necessary for creating original classifications and linkages based on superficial resemblances. In the *New Science*, philology provides one condition for bridging this gap, philosophy the other.

Philosophy contemplates reason, whence comes knowledge of the true; philology observes that of which human choice is the author, whence comes consciousness of the certain. This axiom by its second part includes among the philologists all the grammarians, historians, critics, who have occupied themselves with the study of the languages and the deeds of peoples: deeds at home, as in their customs and laws, and deeds abroad, as in their wars, peaces, alliances, travels, commerce. This same axiom shows how the philosophers failed by half in not giving certainty to their reasonings by appeal to the authority of the philologists, and likewise how the latter failed by half by not taking care to give their authority the sanction of truth by appeal to the reasonings of the philosophers (Vico 1968, par. 138-40).

According to Vico, philology is a branch of *coscienza*, conscious experience and understanding of particular facts, including facts about particular historical human beings and their particular societies. *Coscienza* is capable of achieving certainty (*il certo*), either by the direct and unquestioned sensory experience of physical nature or by the direct and unquestioned understanding of language and other institutions. This is what Vico means by common sense (*sensus communis*) or “judgment

without reflection." Here is where Vico draws his important distinction between two types of common sense: inner and outer. Again, although we can be said to have direct and indubitable sensory experience of physical nature—however rationally fallible it might be—it is, for Vico, of a different kind than the direct and indubitable understanding we have of the language and institutions that constitute our lives “from the inside.” Indeed, if our common sense understanding of language and life can never aspire to the kind of rationally demonstrable certainty and universal truth that Vico associates with that other human science—geometry—it is nonetheless capable of achieving a certainty and demonstrability greater than that of physics.

Although Vico speaks of common sense as providing the kind of pre-reflective certitude philologists can claim for their findings, he elsewhere (as noted above) asserts that common sense *qua* common designates a kind of universal understanding that lies at the origin of all languages, no matter how different they are from one another. In this respect, philology can aid philosophy in its search for universal truths and, more important, can aid historical understanding by revealing a “common language” bridging what are otherwise radically distinct nations and epics.

There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grasps the substance of things feasible in human social life, and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things have diverse aspects. A proof of this is afforded by proverbs or maxims of vulgar wisdom, in which substantially the same meanings find as many diverse expressions as there are nations ancient and modern. This common mental language is proper to our Science, by whose light linguistic scholars will be enabled to construct a mental vocabulary common to all the various articulate languages living and dead (par.161).

Clearly, philology is able to construct a common language bridging modern (conceptual) and ancient (poetic) languages because the former contains traces of the latter in its own etymology. Today’s dead metaphors were yesterday’s living metaphors and as such reveal something about the lives and institutions of earlier humans (par. 152). Indeed, according to Vico, today’s clear and distinct ideas merely condense yesterday’s metaphors:

Take for example, “the blood boils in my heart,” based on a property natural, eternal, and common to all mankind. They took the blood, the boiling, and the heart, and then made of them a single word, as it were, a genus, called in Greek *stomachos*, in Latin *ira*, and in Italian *collera* (par. 460).

Although philology goes far toward bridging the gap between present and past, it cannot succeed alone in this endeavor. Philosophy is needed to provide direct and rational insight into the universal laws governing the evolution from past to present implicit in the *corsi* run by all nations. How it accomplishes this is far from clear. Vico mentions that philosophers sometimes cognize universals by means of abstracting common properties from a comparison of particulars. Thus, he notes that before the Athenians enacted their laws they came to agreement independently about their utility, which agreement was then adumbrated by Socrates “by induction” in the form of “collecting uniform particulars which go to make up” “intelligible genera or abstract universals” (Vico 1968, par., 1040). In his introductory commentary to the third edition of the *New Science*, Max Fisch also seems to imply that this is how philosophical reason supplements philology (Fisch, 1744, xxx). However, as Berlin rightly notes, that couldn’t be the whole story, since induction based on observed similarities yields at best probabilistic “knowledge” of *how* things happen and not the demonstrable understanding of *why* things must happen that Vico claims for his historical science (Berlin 1976, 83).

Vico must therefore be understood as saying that philosophical reason takes up the “certain” findings of philological understanding and the less certain probabilistic findings of comparative history in rationally intuiting the universal stages of historical development. Just how this is possible—if God and not humanity is the creator of these natural laws—is unclear. As Habermas notes, Vico denies that historical agents make history with the same degree of transparent consciousness that God (for whom conceiving is creating) makes nature, here understood to include human nature and its historical laws. Like Hegel’s cunning of reason (*List der Vernunft*), Vico’s God makes historical agents accomplish higher ends without their conscious consent and participation. Furthermore, Vico’s cyclical understanding of historical laws conforms more closely to the pagan view of “naturalized” history than to the Christian (or salvationist) view traditionally associated with the idea of providence. Since history does not progress in any straightforward linear manner, it is difficult for Vico to sustain that history as such reveals a

clear and certain, rational pattern (or logic) of providential lawfulness (Habermas 1973, 244-247).

The last problem may indeed be insuperable. However, if we leave aside the problem of cyclical *ricorsi* and focus exclusively on the laws governing historical *corsi*, which do reveal a progressive development, a solution to the first problem may be at hand. Anticipating the absolute idealism of Hegel, Vico may have believed that human beings could participate directly in the divine mind. This idea seems less far-fetched when we recall that, for Vico, humans create religion—and God—in their own image (Vico 1968, par. 367). Like Hegel, Vico might then be understood as equating God with the human spirit, so that the providential *corsi* run by all nations would be a human creation fully knowable by them. Knowing themselves as historical beings would then be tantamount to knowing the self-actualization of God in history.

Such an intriguing solution to the problem of universal historical knowledge transcends the scope of our epistemological inquiry, which is focused on the possibility of a more mundane solution. One solution, alluded to earlier, appeals to the fact that analytical reason builds upon and incorporates the accomplishments of poetic wisdom. Just as Immanuel Kant would later argue that analytic reason (abstraction and induction) already presupposes synthetic (transcendental) reason, which deploys the schematism of the imagination to unify discrete sensory qualia into image-types (or schemas), so Vico argues that abstracting universal laws presupposes analogical reasoning, which creates imaginative universals. Following yet another clue suggested by Kant, such analogical reasoning can be compared to a kind of *reflective* judgment, which discovers universals (or types, such as “the beautiful”) based upon feelings and intuitions associated with particulars.<sup>7</sup>

Drawing from an example that is closer to Vico’s own experience as a jurist, judges defer to reflective judgment whenever they seek to discover the proper rule under which to subsume cases that are susceptible to conflicting interpretations. Cases that are especially recalcitrant to subsumption under given laws may call forth an additional act of reflective judgment in which the laws themselves are reinterpreted. A case in point is the right to privacy in American jurisprudence. This

7 Kant’s examination of the amphibolies of reflection in the First Critique and his account of reflective judgment in the Third Critique further extend his treatment of synthetic reason. For discussion of this aspect of Kant’s thought see Ingram 1985 and 1988.



right was created (or “discovered”) in the landmark case *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) by a process of analogical reasoning, in which the freedom of couples to engage in family planning (including gaining access to birth control) was compared to earlier constitutional rulings regarding freedom from invasive search and seizure, freedom of speech, and other “similar” cases.

The important point to bear in mind is that the analogical reasoning deployed by jurists implicates a kind of non-analytical reflection. When Vico says that historical knowledge presupposes philosophical reason, it might very well be this kind of *aesthetic and inventive* reflection he has in mind. Indeed, in the next section we shall see that it must be this kind of reflection. But in that case, at least one form of enlightened reason *does* possess an elective affinity with pre-enlightened poetic wisdom. Such an affinity would bridge the gap between enlightened philosophical understanding and poetic wisdom. And it would also confirm one of the central tenets of philosophical hermeneutics as Gadamer understands it. For Gadamer, Vico’s major contribution resides less in espousing a method of historical understanding than in preserving an ontological truth about human being in general: that the basis of practical reason (what Aristotle calls *phronesis*) is none other than the art of sound judgment cultivated on the basis of common sense (Gadamer 1993, 19-24). In other words, to the extent that any act of understanding involves the judicious art of asking just the right questions (i.e., of applying what one already knows to discover what one does not already know), any knowledge whatsoever can be said to rest upon the re-appropriation of an effective history, sedimented in tradition and language. Sound judgment of this kind cannot be exercised through methodical analysis, but must be acquired through experience.

But that cannot be all there is to historical understanding. Vico insists that such historical understanding also presupposes a method – or more precisely, knowledge of a sequential, law-like progression – that enables the historian to understand earlier forms of society as in some sense analogous to his or her own childhood. So construed, the new science deploys a pre-methodological form of analogical reasoning to discover a methodical form of explanation and understanding. For Vico this methodical form of understanding presupposes that social evolution (phylogenesis) replicates the stages of maturation from childhood (ontogenesis). Perhaps Vico believed that our lived participation in the natural cycle of birth, maturation, and death provided an analogue to

understanding the necessity of a similar cycle in the birth, maturation and decline of nations (Vico 1968, par. 349). He himself draws the analogy between childhood and poetic wisdom, on one hand, and maturity and philosophical wisdom, on the other, as partial confirmation of his thesis (par. 186, 213, 408, 412-13, 447, 454, 498, 1032). The language, logic, and thought-processes of the earliest peoples—the “children of the human race” (par. 498)—replicate the language, logic, and thought-processes of childhood. Because we modern rationalists also passed through this stage, we can be said to have run through the *corso* that all nations run through in our own lifetime, and so can be said to be co-author of it to a degree that provides a modicum of historical knowledge *per causas*.

Establishing an analogy between phylogenesis and ontogenesis might indeed be necessary for a speculative philosopher seeking to articulate a universal history of humanity. Whether such an analogy can be sustained is, of course, a matter of considerable contention on which Vico himself sheds very little light. Be that as it may, for our purposes the question about social evolution revolves around the problem of historical understanding simpliciter and not merely around the problem of establishing a universal course through which all nations traverse.

### 3. The Contemporary Relevance of Vico's Science of Historical Understanding

Before we examine the hypothesis that Vico's historical hermeneutics rests upon a theory of social evolution, let us re-examine more closely why it cannot rest upon the historicist methodology attributed to it by Berlin. It is true that Vico sometimes sounds like an historicist when he talks about the radical gulf separating poetic from rational modes of understanding. The impression he gives that worldviews and modes of understanding are self-contained is further reinforced by his belief that the gentile nations developed their own peculiar common sense without communicating with one another (Vico 1968, par. 145).

Historicism is Cartesian in its view that the subject and object of knowledge are separated by such an immense gulf that knowledge can only be achieved by the knower “methodically” bracketing out her subjectivity in an effort to conform to the object. More precisely, historicists endeavor to bring about a true correspondence with their object by critically checking the effects of their own worldview, as these

are shaped by language and culture. In their opinion, once the historian has cleared her head of all contemporary prejudices, she will be in a position to sympathetically enter into the mind of her subject. If this seems impossible, she can by-pass the deep, substantive differences she finds incomprehensible in her subject and, like a natural scientist using the inductive method, focus on the superficial formal resemblances between it and her own worldview.

In that case, historical science would be imitating natural science. This model of historical science, famously defended in the last century by Karl Popper and Carl Hempel, is deeply problematic for reasons we have already adduced. The universal laws that a naturalized historical science discovers through a comparative analysis of particular historical events will be useless in understanding why particular events had to happen the way they did. Explanations of particular historical events by appeal to general laws will never succeed because it is precisely the particular circumstances surrounding them—and above all, the particular purposes of the agents who made them—that enable us to understand why they had to happen the way they did. Stated differently, subsuming a particular event under a general covering law provides something less than a genuine causal explanation of the event, and really amounts to showing nothing more than how it resembles other events. In his own way, Vico seems to have already anticipated this objection to the covering-law method of historical explanation in his insistence that a true historical cause must refer to a meaningful purpose of an agent, be it human or superhuman.

In sum, although Vico often appeals to the comparative method in defending the universal patterns common to all nations at a certain stage of development (Vico 1968, par. 344-45), he cannot consistently hold that this “abstract” knowledge is the true knowledge afforded by his new science. Doing so would contradict his epistemological axiom that true knowledge explains why things happen *per causas*, which is possible only because the knower has in some sense meaningfully and intentionally participated in the creation of what she knows. The use of observable associations between discrete types of events manifesting a certain stochastic frequency, as David Hume rightly noted, cannot explain, with the kind of “demonstrable necessity” Vico demands of his science, why one nation passes from one stage of social evolution to another. Such historical necessity, Vico says, must rather be understood in the first place as internally caused by the freely willed intentions of

human beings and, in the second place, by the unintended consequences of such intentional acts. Such consequences must in turn be understood as serving higher ends vis-à-vis the meaningful realization of institutions that are in turn logically necessary for the meaningful realization of a fully human—and rational—way of life. In the last instance, this amounts to showing how one stage of understanding logically implies and irreversibly builds upon its predecessor—a kind of teleology that Vico attributes to “divine providence.”

If the model of understanding appealed to by Vico is not the methodical suspension of subjective biases and imaginative identification described by historicists, then what is it? As we have seen, Vico’s treatment of the connection between common sense, rhetoric, and judgment suggests that the kind of historical understanding he has in mind is closer to the *pre-methodological*, ontological understanding articulated by Heideggerians like Gadamer. According to Gadamer, we can never methodically rise above the parochial languages and traditions that have shaped our understanding because, as Vico well understood, they form the certain (if *conceptually* pre-reflective) common sense background to all understanding. However, saying that understanding is conditioned by the present does not prevent us from understanding the archaic past (or for that matter, other cultures). For the present and past are held together by a common and continuous culture whose changes in the course of historical reinterpretation work to preserve its authority; and even widely diverse cultures share a potential for mutual understanding (what Gadamer calls the speculative dimension of language) based on something analogous to Vico’s pre-reflective common sense (Vico 1968, par. 356).

Vico warns us that historians must be careful not to “project” uncritically their “modern” and “enlightened” assumptions onto their archaic subjects. But self-critical understanding need not—and as we have seen, cannot—involve the wholesale bracketing of cultural and linguistic prejudices. Rather, since we must engage our parochial prejudices in understanding—they are, after all, the only familiar reference points we have for interrogating the world around us—we must engage them with the subject matter of the archaic text itself, in the form of simulated dialogue involving mutual questioning. Here understanding will be oriented toward a kind of agreement or mutual understanding, in which the original meaning of the archaic text is nonetheless reinterpreted—or rephrased—within the familiar language of the historian. So construed,

historical interpretation will not be merely reproductive—preserving the truth of tradition in some timeless and unchanging form—but will also be poetic and creative.

As noted above, there are many indications within Vico's text that suggest that he shares the basic tenets of this philosophical hermeneutics. To begin with, he embraces the fact that poetic language creates and constitutes all meaning and identity, and so provides the *Ursprung* from which reason itself springs (Vico 1968, par. 362). Too, he thinks we can communicate with the past from the standpoint of the present—and learn from it. This communication is implicitly dialogical, since Vico believes that enlightened historical understanding can learn to appreciate the basic truth embedded in cultural tradition, namely that reason itself rests upon a providential authority that transcends its powers of analysis and clarification.

However, it would seem that Vico's new science goes beyond philosophical hermeneutics in several important respects. First, it does not vest *particular* traditional *beliefs* with a timeless claim to authority and wisdom. On the contrary, it unmasks their ideological pretensions by showing that they originate in ignorance (Vico 1968, par. 375) and class domination. Such ideological justifications of domination may be necessary in early stages of human evolution, but they are deceptions nonetheless—falsehoods concealing the rational truth implicit in Christian humanism (par. 375). Second, the new science is able to do this partly because it appeals to a view of historical evolution that sees the rational age of men—the Cartesian age of clear and distinct ideas—as a secular instantiation of Christian humanism, which articulates the universal equality and freedom of all (reasonable) men as having been made in the image of God. Finally, because the new science is itself a product of this age, it must incorporate within its mode of historical understanding the critical methods of philosophical science that enable it to expose the deceptions of earlier ages.

#### 4. Between Critical and Redemptive Hermeneutics: Vichean Science as Humanistic Praxis and Theological Consolation

What critical methods did Vico have in mind? They could not be the methods of conceptual analysis proposed by Descartes, since these

require abstracting from historical understanding. Nonetheless, there is something vaguely Cartesian about Vico's description of historical methods. These methods involve rendering "clear and distinct" (par. 390) certain "modifications of the mind" (par. 349) that are objectified in the historical traces of our own language. Vichean science begins by analyzing the rich data of history (through "a severe analysis of human thoughts" [par. 347]), in order to uncover certain universal and unquestioned principles—principles, to be sure, whose certainty is guaranteed not by pure reason demanding indubitable certainty but rather by a kind of pre-reflective common sense establishing what is beyond question. With a kind of geometrical rigor, it deduces from these principles—of religion, marriage, and burial—something like a necessary and universal sequence of developmental stages, or what he elsewhere calls a "history of ideas" (par. 347). This history, in turn, enables the new science to prove the rational superiority of Christian humanism in comparison to pre-rational religion (early Christianity included), which justifies hierarchy and inequality.

Vico's "hermeneutics of suspicion"—the unmasking of ideology as subterfuge for class domination—proceeds by linking the understanding of meanings to the explanation of causes. The historical agent's purposes that lend action meaning produce both intended and unintended effects, and so are causes in this sense. However, such purposes have concealed within them ulterior meanings and aims that are not intended—indeed, are not even known—by the agent. The religious myths that validate the heroic natural law that "might makes right" are really an expression of a particular human caste system and not a true depiction of divinity. But this deeper meaning is concealed from both the powerful who invoke the law to advance their ends as well as from the weak who submit to it in violation of their ends. Likewise, the fact that such a caste system and its corresponding ideological form represent a necessary stage in human evolution is also concealed from them. These two sets of deeper meanings—the genesis of natural law out of contingent systems of human domination and the genesis of a stage of social evolution according to a necessary logic—act to compel human action in some causally necessary way.

Scholars such as Paul Ricoeur and Jürgen Habermas have convincingly argued that the kind of hermeneutics of suspicion that I have attributed to Vico's new science can be compared to psychoanalytic interpretation.<sup>8</sup>

8 See Ricoeur 1970 and Habermas 1971.

Like Freudian psychoanalysis, Vichean science approaches its subject matter with suspicion: the literal or surface meaning of a neurotic episode or social ideology is misunderstood or not understood at all by the agent, so that what she thinks she is doing does not correspond to what she is really doing. Her behavior therefore bears the trace of an unconscious motivation that “compels” her to behave in mysterious ways.

It bears repeating that this is precisely the kind of concealed purpose that, according to Vico, causally compels historical agents to bring about—against their own free will—the higher purposes ordained by Providence and the developmental logic implicit in the idea of humanity. In this sense, historical agents both are and are not the agents of history. They become fully agents only after they understand the deeper humanity animating their own behavior. The *New Science* aids in this endeavor in two ways. First, it vindicates religion, moral moderation, and faith in the immortality of the soul by showing that they are the certain and unquestionable presuppositions underlying any form of human life. Second, it shows how the achievement of rational humanism—indeed, the very science that criticizes unquestioned presuppositions—necessarily unfolds out of these very same taken-for-granted, commonsense institutions.

But of course the new science is more than just “rational theology.” It is rational theology used to unmask ideology. Just as psychoanalysis depends upon a (mythic) theory of ontogenetic (psycho-sexual) development in order to explain how the agent’s neurotic episodes can be understood in terms of a failed attempt at resolving crises that necessarily unfold within the hidden drama of sexual maturation, so too Vichean history depends upon a theory of social evolution to explain how society’s ideological compulsions can be understood in terms of failed attempts at being fully human – or fully adult. Habermas (following Alfred Lorenzer) has shown how such compulsions can be understood in terms of a model of “distorted communication” (Habermas 1971, 256). Neurotic behavior is a “symbolic” re-enactment of a childhood trauma written in the paleo-symbolic code of the unconscious in which distinct persons, things, and events from childhood are “poetically” condensed or displaced through use of metonym, synecdoche, or metaphor. One must have an understanding of this language—and the various manifestations it assumes in the course of psycho-sexual development—to decipher the hidden meaning of the neurotic’s behavior, which is both repetition of and fixation on an earlier infantile stage of development.

Once this meaning is revealed to the neurotic, her behavior ceases to be compelled by the logic of blind causality and can be rationally and freely controlled.

A similar kind of distorted communication seems to explain ideologically rigidified behavior. The mechanical enactment of destructive (masochistic and sadistic) behavior—for instance, the regression of supposedly enlightened individuals into a fascist movement—can be explained in terms of the hypnotic effect that pre-rational propaganda has on the average mind. Fascist propaganda is similar to those “mute” mytho-poetic (hieroglyphic) languages spoken by priests and children. These languages, too, condense feeling and thought; play upon subliminal, unconscious associations between sexual desire and violence; and deliberately conflate fantasy with fact, fact with norm, and norm with personal charisma, in such a way as to resist rational questioning. As Vico notes, such languages are more like divine incantations—or rituals—than meaningful utterances containing clear referential (factual) meanings and interactive intentions.

Vico’s intriguing idea that each stage of social evolution possesses its own distinctive level of linguistic, logical, and cognitive-moral development remarkably anticipates well-known theories of child development advanced by Jean Piaget and, more recently, Habermas. According to Habermas, the process of cultural and societal rationalization that accompanies social evolution can be understood as a process of “linguisticification” whereby primitive, mythopoetic modes of language use are gradually supplanted by more prosaic and utilitarian forms of rational communication (Habermas 1984, 67-69, 72 ff.; 1984, 3-111). This has important implications for Habermas’s approach to ideology critique. Whereas early “poetic” modes of linguistic usage collapse distinctions between facts, values, and personal expressions/fantasies—a syndrome that still survives in early modern conceptions of natural, divine-command theories of natural law—modern “prosaic” communication separates them out according to their own irreducibly distinct logics. Because scientific-descriptive, legal-moral, and aesthetic-expressive utterances are now treated as if they were logically distinct from one another, they are uniquely susceptible to criticism by appeal to “clear and distinct” standards of evidence (Habermas 1987, 188-97).

The centrality of clear and distinct standards of evidence to rational critique returns us to our original theme: the manner in which Vichean science both is and is not Cartesian. As we have seen, even the herme-



neutics of suspicion must stop short of demanding absolute clarity and indubitable certainty with respect to its subject matter. Ideology critique can never aspire to complete transparent understanding of historical meaning because even it must take for granted some unquestioned presuppositions. Furthermore, when pure reason becomes uncritical of its own hyperbolic pretensions—demanding absolute justification for every conceivable authority—we descend into a kind of Jacobin Terror in which all culture becomes suspect. Such “barbarism of reflection,” as Vico refers to it, is irrational because it is contrary to what any self-critical reason could reasonably demand.

In sum, critical reason becomes “redemptive” at the point in which it becomes self-evident that meaning arises out of a pre-rational act of poetic imagination.<sup>9</sup> For theologically inspired critical theorists like Vico and Walter Benjamin, language represents a sedimentation of anonymous, meaning-creating syntheses that can never be replicated by human beings acting rationally and deliberately. The rhetorical power of modern language owes an infinite debt to a poetic past whose roots are essentially pre-rational. True understanding, therefore, will respect and preserve that past, even as it criticizes it.

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9 Habermas acknowledges this essential limit to ideology critique: in his essay, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin” (1979).

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