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Notes on Vico's Contribution to a Dialectical Paradigm of Knowledge

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

Giambattista Vico

The enquiry into human self-knowledge, as everyone knows, goes back to the ancient Greeks and, in particular, to Herodotus. Though born in a thoroughly anti-historical milieu (centered in mathematics), it began by posing questions about our knowledge of human actions. Such an enquiry was understandably permeated by theocratic and mythological elements, but it gave answers to questions on rational grounds and was essentially humanistic. Since then, the search for human self-knowledge and for an understanding of the process and nature of knowing has been torn between the Scylla of anti-historicism and the Charybdis of historical determinism.

The main purpose of this essay is to explore Giambattista Vico's contribution to human self-knowledge, and, in particular, his view of the relationship between consciousness, knowledge, and history.¹ The main focus will be the tension in Vico's principle of *verum et factum convertuntur*, which underlies his immanent, though historical, conception of human knowledge and practice. Section I will begin with Vico's notion that history is made (or unmade) by a humanity whose collective self-consciousness develops *pari passu* with the stages of the historical process, regardless of the deliberate direction of human efforts. Here, I will identify two problematic tensions: Vico's inability to grasp the unintended consequences of human action, and his ambivalent conception of consciousness. Section II turns to the question of human agency and

historical process. I argue that Vico's departure from the atomism of his age allows him to develop a new sense of "objectivity" which can "reveal" the secrets of history, depending on the subject's position in the historical process. Section III concentrates on Vico's epistemology and its (critical) implications for the paradigm of modern "science." Here as well, Vico's view is contrary to conceptions of "pure knowledge" but his insight could not be developed without an ontological understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature. Finally, Section IV concludes that Vico's view of history is substantially weakened by his ambivalent conception of human nature, which can not conceive of historical transformation as the result of cumulative social action.

Needless to say, our standpoint in the modern (more specifically, advanced capitalist) world gives us a particular perspective from which Vico's insights and limitations can be examined in light of problems and thinking that he could not have anticipated. Thus, what we discover in Vico's work may depend as much on a proper reading of his *oeuvre* as on the interaction between it and our own concerns.² This is no more than a modest attempt to identify and sketch out some of the tensions in his philosophy of history, and, in the process, to suggest their present relevance.

I

Vico's seminal principle of his *New Science*, "... the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and ... its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own mind,"³ indicates a profound tension. The nature and implications of this tension can only be understood by seeing his Ideal Eternal History of Humanity as a break with Medieval transcendentalism and Cartesian epistemology.

Disputing the Cartesian principle that the criterion of truth is the clear and distinct idea, Vico counterposed the notion that *verum et factum convertuntur*: in essence, the principle that to know something is to have made it. When applied to history, as Pompa observed, Vico believed that the identity of the historian and the historical agents, qua human beings, permitted the former to come to know the historical process.⁴ Given that early peoples were by nature 'poets,'⁵ the master key of philology would make the historical world intelligible to contemporaries; that is to say, a possible object of knowledge. This was an enormous step forward from Cartesianism which dismissed the factor of human identity as a possible element in making knowable the world of human actions.⁶ By the same

token, this view set Vico apart from the Medieval conception of an antithesis between isolated individual actions and the divine plan that unites them.

As we shall argue below, however, Vico's posing of the creative imagination as the ultimate connection between the object of knowledge (history) and the subject that knows (the historian, and by extension, humanity), remains problematic on two accounts. First of all, the role of human consciousness (the subjective principle, will) is conceived as an Aristotelian entelechy in regards to its contribution to the sustaining and transforming of the historical world. This problem, and the tension between the world as is and the causal process that determines it, is linked to what for lack of a better term we might call his diachronous conception of human nature. Secondly, the unintended consequences of human action remain inadequately accounted for by an immanent objective principle (necessity) once the authority of a divine plan is rejected.

The root of the problem seems to lie in the tension between Vico's predominantly natural-rational⁷ approach and the historical-dialectical elements that he discloses but cannot develop. As Robert W. Cox has noted, natural-rationalism rests on a duality that distinguishes between an inward nature knowable by reason and outward appearances which, historically, manifest themselves in cyclical form.⁸ For example, Vico's praise for both Plato (who deals with abstractions) and Tacitus (who focuses on detailed events) speaks of his attempt to synthesize the world of ideas with that of historical/empirical facts, a precondition for historical knowledge.⁹ Yet, it is the limitations of the natural-rationalist elements that hold back the broadening of his theory of knowledge and historical method—together with the unavoidable limitations derived from the level of social and economic development of his fragmented contemporary world. As Walsh has pointed out, "Much of the history he puts forward is what is called in one place (heading to 905) 'rational history'; history, that is to say, which rests not so much on evidence as on 'philosophical principles.'"¹⁰ But unlike natural-law theorists that relied mostly on speculation, Vico seeks to ground his principles on 'reasonable' premises as to the nature of humanity. Here, his starting point is early humanity: savage, wild, and behaving "under the strong impulsion of violent passions, as beasts do."¹¹ Hobbes' influence is evident, but Vico's historical insight tells him that such nature is no more than a *nascimento*, not an invariable essence. Human nature, in its course, develops attributes that correspond to the succession of three classical ages: "fierce and cruel!" during the age of gods; "virtuous" during the heroic age; and finally "reasonable" during

the age of the popular commonwealths.¹²

Though Vico's three cyclical ages resemble Medieval periodizing (e.g., that of Joachim of Floris; and, in fact, are derived from Egyptian antiquity),¹³ they reveal an essentially secular vision of the ends and means of history. In other words, a history devoid of revelation. Vico asserts: "Through the same error of their imagination men had a terrible fear of the gods whom they themselves had created."¹⁴ In this light it is difficult not to draw the inference that Vico's "Divine Providence" has very little to do with Medieval theology. His division between the natural world (which, "since God made it, he alone knows") and the world of nations (which only "men could come to know"),¹⁵ already makes this clear.¹⁶ The meaning of history and knowledge of its proper realm (civil society) are to be found *within* history itself; for the focus is now human action and not divine attributes which determine beforehand "What must have happened and what must be going to happen."¹⁷

Nevertheless, while Vico in practice rejects the transcendental dimensions of St. Augustin's providence, he retains its immanentism.¹⁸ In the *New Science* the weight of the objective principle (determination) overrides wills, desires, and knowledge; even though, paradoxically, it is an aspect of the subjective principle, namely, the creative imagination, which enables the historian to recreate the past. Although creative imagination manifests itself in the poetry of the heroic age, it largely remains an attribute that can be fully used in retrospect from the standpoint of the more developed age.¹⁹

In a sense, the tension in Vico's thought stems from his inability to account for the unintended consequences of individual human action within the framework of the human struggle for existence, and hence, in terms of our primary character as producers—of wealth, of institutions, of culture, of science.²⁰ Unable to grasp the full meaning of the class contradictions that his own analysis of Rome had disclosed, for example, he posits an historical world where consciousness manifests a Janus-like duality: on the one hand, ineffectual individual will; on the other, the immanence of a collective mind.²¹ An ironic confirmation of his own historical hypothesis, Vico had no possibility of grounding his discoveries on a well developed theory of socio-economic transformation that would eventually arise out of the historical process itself.

II

Book IV of the *New Science* deals with the problem of agency and his-

torical reality. It establishes a connection between human ideas and the historical world that gives them unity and coherence. Here, Vico uncovers the social-historical bases of thought in ways that anticipate the more elaborate arguments of Marx and Weber. Still, as we saw above, purposive action remains conditioned, both by circumstances and by an immanent force that propels history in an unforeseen direction. This view comes close to affirming a metaphysical duality whereby, once again, the historical process is divorced from historical human action.

Despite this tension, Vico's approach marks a return to a humanistic perspective where *res gestae* are important in themselves and need to be investigated without recourse to the authority of an *a priori* divine plan. Thus, each of the three ages is characterized by a *particular* type of rule, institutions, law, customs, and reason. This perspective brings Vico closer to the Renaissance historians. But here he is neither depicting the Renaissance view of human nature as passionate and impulsive, nor expressing the ancient optimism of people controlling their destiny through willful acts and disciplined intellect. Rather, Vico is examining hermeneutically the interaction of parts within a historical whole, their genesis, and their transformation as part of the historical process itself.²²

The novelty of Vico's method and his departure from the atomism of his own age (notably, that of Berkeley and Spinoza) has been noted by Fisch and Bergin.²³ But his notion of totality is more than a methodological tool: it is a philosophical conception of history as a self-contained, and self-transforming, cosmos.²⁴ This vision, consequently, must grapple with the question of genesis and change, as it were, from the inside and on rational grounds—which is to say, in social terms (since "the world of men" is distinct from "the world of nature").

Not surprisingly, considerations of power and inequality are central to Book IV, which deals with "The Course the Nations Run." Here, human action is conditioned by both the stage of human development and the degree of "concealment" of reality. During the first age, "men believed that everything was commanded by the gods."²⁵ Then the real nature of the world was confounded by a "deceit of the imagination." Significantly, such deceit was neither fortuitous nor the result of a conscious conspiracy but stemmed from two socio-structural (or if you will, functional) requirements of the age: "one, that religion is the only means powerful enough to restrain the fierceness of peoples; and the other, that religions flourish when they are inwardly revered by those who preside over them."²⁶

Similarly, the social basis of inequality is disclosed during the heroic (human) governments that were founded upon the establishment of despotic

paternal property rights.²⁷ This is already, it should be recalled, beyond the earlier state of nature as depicted by the natural-law theorists. The age of heroes, in a sense, is perhaps the most truly *historical* (though clearly, not necessarily fully *human*)²⁸ period since it marks the transition from “bestial liberty” into actual “human society.”²⁹ Here too, however, the continuation of religious practices (which indicate continuity with the preceding age) and the solemnity of the laws (which are a new historical requirement proper to the “aristocratic commonwealths”) still keep the multitudes in partial ignorance.³⁰ Vico then makes it clear that every age faces the problem of legitimating power and inequality; a problem that is directly linked to the stability or instability of particular forms of authority. Hence the need for the guarding of the “confines,” the “laws,” and the “institutions.”³¹

On the other hand, the third age—the “age of men”—appears largely free of mystification, for illusions, deceit, and secrecy are a reflection of human nature as it develops, and persist only as long as humanity has not achieved full rationality.³² At this stage, it is the historian (and by implication, the historical agents) who are capable of understanding the whole of history: past, present, and, to a degree, future.

The *New Science* thus makes known the secrets of history by providing us with an objectivity of a particular kind. Obviously, this is not the objectivity of empiricism which poses a radical disjunction between subject and object, but it is one of a mediated perspective on historical facts. Unlike the objective necessity of Medieval narration of *gesta Dei*; or the one-sided rationalism of Descartes’ *cogito ergo sum*;³³ or the unimaginative immediacy of a fragmented history built upon “brute data,”³⁴ Vico’s history runs a course (or recourse) where consciousness shapes, and is itself shaped by a human—that is to say social—process of creation (cultural, spiritual, material).

Much like Hegel’s Idea, Vico’s Divine Providence, nevertheless, acquires an immanent bent which vitiates his discovery of social struggle as a concrete, historical motive force. Vico’s history culminates in an unfolding movement whereby the *factum* combines with the *verum*; where philology permeates philosophy; where *scienza* becomes *coscienza*; and, eventually, humanity understands itself and its own history because it has made it, i.e., because it, collectively, has traversed through its three ages.

III

A superficial survey of the long-standing epistemological debate between

“historicists” and “positivists”³⁵ is enough to indicate Vico’s precociousness and originality. Vico’s historicism, as we have seen, boldly questions at least two of the pillars of modern “science”: the postulation of a high degree of subjective autonomy,³⁶ and the idea of value-free investigation.³⁷ In the same vein, he intuitively recognizes³⁸ that a narrow inductivist conception of inquiry is untenable (as argued, for example, by Hempel)³⁹ since findings or facts can be qualified as logically relevant or irrelevant only in terms of a given hypothesis and “not in reference to a given problem.” It is no accident that the principles of the *New Science* are critical (for they are concerned with the prevailing order and its origins), explanatory (which, in Vico’s own words, “is the distinguishing mark of science,”⁴⁰ and synthetic (not merely analytic).

Moreover, Vico anticipates the current criticism of empiricist epistemology concerning its inability to conceive of inter-subjective meanings which exist not just in the minds of individual actors, but which are essentially “modes of social relations, of mutual action,”⁴¹ and exist in constitutive social practices. Vico’s creative imagination and his novel view of the world as human creation thus foreshadows the conception that practice is the constitution of the objective world through the objectification of the human subject.⁴² What E.P. Thompson said of Caudwell’s unity of binary oppositions can, with equal justice, be said of Vico’s dialectic: it is “not only a way of seeing, it is a way of teaching how to see.”⁴³ And it is in this sense that Vico’s claim as to the universality of his *New Science* must be interpreted. The *New Science* is neither a complete account of historical process,⁴⁴ nor some kind of normative construct in the manner of Toynbee’s abstract categories.⁴⁵ Vico’s *New Science* represents, above all, in intention and construction, the formulation of a *paradigm* of inquiry; one where knowledge is confined to the stream of history and where it develops through the mutual relation between events and human reflection upon them. Vico’s “natural law of the peoples,” which he contrasts to the abstractions of the “natural law of the philosophers,” entails, therefore, a view opposed to so-called “pure knowledge.”⁴⁶

Vico’s fundamental insight, that knowledge supposes the change of both the subject who knows and the object that is known, however, is an epistemological point whose full implication could not be developed without an *ontological* understanding of the relationship between humanity and nature. For the fact remains that during the course the nations run, people must, of necessity, transform nature—which is to say, nature must be socialized. In this sense, the historical process ontologically includes both the world of civil society and the world of nature though, clearly, this

is nature adapted to human *tekhne* and a certain social organization. Needless to say, this observation was to be addressed methodically much later in terms of political economy,⁴⁷ and, in particular, within the framework of historical materialism.

IV

To conclude, Vico's inquiry into human self-knowledge provided some essential stepping-stones for the elaboration of a dialectical "science" of humanity. His philological, genetic, and holistic method of historical investigation was undeniably a great step in this direction. However, in his attempt to supersede Descartes' anti-historical inclination,⁴⁸ Vico turned history into a cosmos that excluded socialized nature. As has been argued, Vico's criterion of truth is not the clear and distinct idea (a purely subjective criterion) but to have made it (knowing through one's own creation). Yet this truth can only be grasped by humanity at the peak of an unfolding—and largely unconscious—process, at the end of which, paradoxically, we come to retrospective self-knowledge by virtue of *reason*.⁴⁹ This is another indication of Vico's inability to extricate his historicism from natural-rationalism. To be fair, however, Vico's ambivalence could not be overcome as long as the idea of direct human agency remained saddled by an ahistorical objective principle. For Vico, knowledge and historical transformation were less the result of cumulative social action than a reflection of a human nature precariously swinging (*corso* and *ricorso*) between its Hobessian origins and its enlightened maturity. What is missing is the (subsequent) understanding of the social relations of production that link human beings with each other and with material nature through praxis. This view does away with determinism (fortune, providence, cunning of Reason, iron laws) and gives people a measure of control over events (as opposed to the mere controlling of our inward temper before the onslaughts of an intractable world).

The task of ascertaining the truly socio-historical content of both agency and determination is one that remains—even a century after Marx's own contribution in this respect. Much of the intellectual (as opposed to practical) confusion stems from insufficient clarity as to the difference between epistemological principles and ontological considerations. Vico's merit, in terms of the formulation of a philosophy of history, chiefly, is to have stressed the social character of historical change and its investigation. Since Marx, it has become apparent that historical transformation is nothing but *collective practical activity*, a fact ironically confirmed by

the recent transformation of Eastern Europe. Activity, moreover, that is purposive and limited, and which in no way diminishes the importance of individual genius. As the late Raymond Williams wrote, "in practice determination is never only the setting of limits; it is also the exertion of pressures. As it happens this is also a sense of 'determine' in English: to determine or be determined to do something is an act of will and purpose. In a whole social process, these positive determinations, which may be experienced individually but which are always social acts, . . . have very complex relations with the negative determinations that are experienced as limits."⁵⁰

ENDNOTES

- 1 T.G. Bergin and M.H. Fisch, *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*, trans. Cornell University Press, first published in 1948, hereafter cited as NS.
- 2 As E.H. Carr ably put it: "The historian is part of history. The point in the procession at which he finds himself determines his angle of vision over the past." *What is History?*, London: Penguin Books, 1964, p. 36.
- 3 NS, p. 53 (331).
- 4 See Giorgio Tagliacozzo and D.P. Verene, *Giambattista Vico's Science of Humanity*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976, pp. 128–129.
- 5 NS, p. 5 (34).
- 6 Richard Manson, *The Theory of Knowledge of Giambattista Vico*, Hamden: Archon Books, 1969, p. 9.
- 7 See R.G. Collingwood, *The Idea of History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1980, p. 9.
- 8 For a useful exposition of these approaches (albeit in a different context) see Robert W. Cox, "On thinking about future world order," in *World Politics*, 28(2), 1976.
- 9 Manson, *op. cit.*, pp. 2,3,9,10.
- 10 See Walsh's article in Tagliacozzo, *op. cit.*, p. 149.
- 11 NS, p. 58 (340).
- 12 NS, pp. 151 (554), 285 (916, 917), 286 (918).
- 13 NS, p. 27 (173).
- 14 NS, p. 285 (916).
- 15 NS, p. 53 (340). Compare this assertion (which comes after the quotation on p. 1), and witness the reverse parallelism with Jorge Luis Borges' idealist world Tlon; in *Labyrinths*, ed. D.A. Yates and J.E. Irby, New York: New Directions, 1964, pp. 17–18.
- 16 I therefore have no quarrel with Vaughan's assertion that Vico's providence is "in the final analysis, identical with the course of natural necessity," though I cannot subscribe to his equating of it with "the course of nature," an altogether different proposition. See Frederick Vaughan, *The Political Philosophy*

- of *Giambattista Vico* (The Hague: Nijhoff, 1972), p. 41.
- 17 Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- 18 See for example Manson's discussion of this issue, *op. cit.*, pp. 3–5.
- 19 According to Vico, "Men at first feel without perceiving, then they perceive with a troubled and agitated spirit, finally they reflect with a clear mind," NS, p. 33 (218); see also NS, p. Xlix (K7).
- 20 It is amazing, however, how close he comes to see this: "Human choice, by its nature most uncertain, is made certain and determined by the common sense of men with respect to human needs or utilities, which are the two sources of the natural law of the gentes." NS, p. 21 (141); the importance of common sense as a criterion of partial truth (*certum*) was to be developed two centuries later by Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, New York: International Publishers, 1980, pp. 323–333, 419–425.
- 21 "That which did all this [the world of nations] was mind, for men did it with intelligence; it was not fate, for they did it by choice; not chance, for the results of their always so acting are perpetually the same." NS, p. 383 (1108).
- 22 NS, p. 22 (144, 145, 146, 147). Needless to say, the idea that the process of historical change entails real creation and real destruction is typically of Christian origin. For an elaboration of this point see Collingwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 46–52.
- 23 M.H. Fisch and T.G. Bergin, *The Autobiography of Giambattista Vico*, London, 1975, p. 199.
- 24 *Ibid.*, pp. 55–56.
- 25 NS, p. 289 (925).
- 26 NS, p. 285 (916).
- 27 NS, p. 166 (582).
- 28 It is well to remember that for Vico, "Humanity is not a presupposition, but a consequence, an effect, a product of institution building" (NS, Lii [M7]). As noted above, however, human nature and its attributes follow a strictly parallel course to the three stages of the world of nations, forming with them distinct structural configurations.
- 29 NS, p. 151 (554).
- 30 For example, the Law of the Twelve Tables establishes the article *Auspicia incommunicata plebi sunt*—"The auspices shall be withheld from the plebs." NS, p. 319 (985). See also p. 303 (953).
- 31 NS, pp. 316–331 (980–1003).
- 32 NS, pp. 314–334 (975–1008).
- 33 See Fisch and Bergin, *op. cit.*, p. 38.
- 34 This is a term used by Charles Taylor, "Hermeneutics and Politics," in P. Connerton, ed., *Critical Sociology*, London, 1978. It means "data whose validity cannot be questioned by offering another interpretation or reading," p. 158.
- 35 For instance, see Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London: Allen Lane, 1969; E.P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory*, New York: Monthly Review Press, 1978;

- T. Adorno, et. al. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, London: Heinemann, 1976; A. Collier, "In Defense of Epistemology," in *Issues in Marxist Philosophy*, Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1979, Vol. 3 (ed) J. Mephan and D.H. Ruben.
- 36 See E.H. Carr, *op. cit.*, pp. 9, 31–36.
- 37 As people like D. Easton and other followers of structural-functionalist and behaviouralist approaches have traditionally argued—which is *not* to say that inquiry is, or ought to be, groundless. See D. Easton, *A Systems Analysis of Political Life*, New York: Wiley, 1965.
- 38 As Vico's attack on the Stoics and Epicureans evidently indicates; see also his observations concerning his own "metaphysical art of criticism" and his discussion of the "Elements" of his New Science, pp. 18–22 (119–148), 62–65 (348–360), 124 (498–501).
- 39 See Carl G. Hempel, "The Logic of Functional Analysis" and "Explanatory Incompleteness" in May Brodbeck, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, New York: Macmillan, 1968.
- 40 NS, p. 61 (346).
- 41 Charles Taylor, "Hermeneutics and Politics," in P. Connerton, ed., *Critical Sociology*, London, 1978, pp. 171–182.
- 42 In this connection see Paul Browne's interesting discussion in "An Unclaimed Legacy: Caudwell's Marxist Dialectics," in *Science and Society*, Vol. XLVIII, No. 2, Summer 1984.
- 43 Quoted in Browne, *op. cit.*, p. 198.
- 44 NS, pp. XLiv (12–14).
- 45 These are categories that are necessary to account for discrete facts according to the methodology of natural science. See R.G. Collingwood, *op. cit.*, pp. 159–164.
- 46 For an anti-historicist view ambiguously opposed to pure knowledge see Karl Popper, *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1957; for an elaboration of Popperian "objective standards of scientific research" see Lakatos, 1970, pp. 91–180. Note also the resemblance between Vico's theory of diachronous development of knowledge and Kuhn's paradigmatic view of scientific development, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970.
- 47 See, for example, Browne, *op. cit.*, pp. 198–199.
- 48 See Collingwood, *op. cit.*, p. 61.
- 49 See note 19 above; see also NS, pp. 285–286 (916–918), 334 (1008).
- 50 Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1980.