



Vico's New Science: The Unity of ...

2006年5月9日

来源:论坛主题

作者其他文章

Vico's New Science: The Unity of ...

Philosophy of History

Vico's New Science: The Unity of Piety and Wisdom

Joseph P. Vincenzo

Walsh University

ABSTRACT: In Vico's New Science wisdom is understood in a double sense. On the one hand, wisdom means the poetic wisdom that provides intelligibility for the peoples of the nations during their early stages of development. On the other hand, wisdom means the noetic knowledge gained by the Vichian scientist who contemplates concrete historicity in the light of the New Science. By means of an examination of three principle aspects of Vico's science, and by looking to his conception of the origin of the most rudimentary institutions of humanity, primordial piety—fear of the mythic other—is shown to be the origin of poetic wisdom. And, by focusing on the necessity of surmounting the conceit of scholars and the conceit of nations for a science of universal history, philosophical piety—openness to the wholly Other—is revealed as the ground of philosophical wisdom. This paper sets out to show how Vico's science of the principles of humanity is, at the same time, a science of the unity of piety and wisdom.

In the final paragraph of his magnum opus, the *New Science*, Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) provides a summarizing statement concerning the overall character of the work:

Insomma, da tutto ciò che si è quest'opera ragionato, si da finalmente conchiudersi che questa Scienza porta indivisibilmente seco lo studio della pietà, e che, se non siesi pio, non si può daddovero essere saggio. [To sum up, from all that has been set forth in this work, it is to be finally concluded that this science carries inseparably with it the study of piety, and that he who is not pious cannot be truly wise.]

Why did Vico conclude the *New Science* with the assertion that, from everything set forth in this work, this science carries inseparably with it the study of piety? And why did he choose to end the *New Science* with the declaration: "He who is not pious, cannot be truly wise"? In what sense is Vico's *New Science* a science of piety? V

Vico's conception of the ideal eternal history—the universal pattern of the histories of all the nations—signifies a passage from the traditional metaphysical conception of history, as the history of beings, to a metaphysic or science of the certain as the certain reflects or embodies the common nature of nations. This common nature of nations, moreover, is seen in the light of divine providence. Vico's metaphysics, therefore, does not attempt to conceptualize the universal, unchanging truth as an abstraction existing outside human praxis, but contemplates the invisible substance of historicity in and through praxis. Vico's science is, at one and the same time, a science of concrete human praxis, since it is a science of the certain, and a science of divine providence, since it is a science of the true.

In his Introduction to the New Science Vico says that the first principal aspect of this science is that it is a science of divine providence. Vico's divine providence is his name for the Being of the whole of human becoming. Vico's science does not locate this whole as an absolute hovering somewhere outside of the certainties of historicity, but examines the conduct of divine providence as it shows itself in and through historicity. This providential order is neither the result of Epicurean chance or Stoic fate. Nor is it the result of sheer human making. Although appearing in human praxis, providence is something that remains exterior to man, other than man, working, for the most part, contrary to human intentions.

On the basis of the first principal aspect of Vico's New Science—that it is a rational civil theology of divine providence—it is clear that Vico's science is not simply a science of the things made by man alone. As Vico himself says, if it were due to private utility alone, human beings "...vessero in solitudine da fiere bestie." ["...they would live like wild beasts."]. Vico's science is first and foremost, a science of the word. And, the word is born out of a necessity that imposes itself on man. The poetic word does not occur out of sheer human doing or making, but arises out of man's response to the particular manner in which divine providence makes its claim on man from time to time in human historicity. History is not created or produced by men, but occurs as a result of man's fantastic and archaic response to that which is exterior to man, to that which surpasses and ultimately uses man's desires to design the course and recourse of human historicity.

Vico claims that the second principal aspect of the New Science is that it is a philosophy of authority. When Vico claims that his science is a philosophy of authority he means that it contemplates the origins and histories of the customs and institutions of the peoples of the various nations. These histories are contained in the fables of the various nations which are true universal histories of their customs and institutions. The authors of this poetry were the first peoples who were the theological poets. The nations are governed by the certainty of authority. This authority, however, is not ultimately that of the theological poets who brought forth the myths of the gods and heroes. For they were subject to, and had to take their directive from a higher authority. This higher authority was the common sense of the human race. The *sensus communis*—judgments made without reflection born from customs shared by an entire people—is that which provides the basis of the structures of the human world, structures which the poets expressed in various ways in their divine and heroic poetry. And the domain of the *sensus communis* is concrete human praxis. This originary praxis is expressed poetically as the "clearing" of the "primordial forest," depicted by the Greek poets as the "labors of Hercules." This "clearing of the primordial forest" (*schiarita nel bosco*) must not be understood only literally. Vico's "clearings" or "luci" are rather, original expres

sions of the common sense of the human race. And this common sense is itself designed by that which invisibly uses man's collective desires to fashion an ideal eternal history. Seen in this way, Vico's *luci* are not to be understood merely as burnt lands within the enclosures of the woods, but as Ernesto Grassi expresses it, "the bursting forth of Being in human historicity from time to time, always in new forms realizing itself originally in the poetic, imaginative word (*parola fantastica*) in function of which the world appears in its human significance."

The third principal aspect under which Vico claims his science should be viewed is that it is a science of the natural law of the gentiles. Let us first recall Vico's description of the origin of the natural law of the gentiles.

From out of a period of barbarism in which humans had reduced themselves to the conditions of wandering beasts, some of these proto humans were shaken and aroused by a terrible fear of the sky and of the phenomena of the sky. Their imaginative response to these phenomena, together with their experience of the awesome power and indifference of nature, assumed the form of a fear of a particular Uranus or Jove which they feigned and believed in. We should notice here that, for Vico, the origin and sustaining force of the natural law of the gentiles was fear of an apprehended divinity. And this fear was the first piety. It was out of piety (i.e., fear of the absolute Other) that human beings invented religion and entered into carnal unions of solemnized marriage and hence, began to beget certain children of certain parents. This in turn made possible the birth of families. Through continued residence in certain places and through burial of the dead, these first people came to found the first dominions of the earth. Thus, for Vico, piety is the origin of the natural law of the gentiles and hence made possible the emergence not only the three most rudimentary institutions of humanity, marriage, religion and burial of the dead, but of the *luci*. Man was able to break out of nature through startling fear at the experience of his own alienation from nature. Vico's *luci* thus arise out of man's pious response to the indifference and overpowering power of nature, to the otherness of nature which the theological poets first envisaged as divinities

When we gather together these three principal aspects of Vico's New Science we find that all three aspects hold one thing in common. They all involve the idea that this science is a science of man's engagement with, or response to, an essential exteriority or otherness to man. They all imply that for Vico, the poetic wisdom which founds, animates and gives meaning and value to the human world arises out of man's recognition of, and primary response to that which is neither a being nor even to the totality of all beings, but to that which is other than man. We discover that poetic wisdom arises out of and is sustained by piety.

We are now in a position to respond to our second question: Why does Vico say that from everything set forth in this work, it must finally be concluded that "he who is not pious cannot be truly wise"? The answer to this question is already implied in our examination of the sense in which Vico's science is a science of piety. Piety, we saw, is the archaic human response to that which is other than man. If there is to be poetic wisdom, there must be piety. But when Vico says further, that from this it must be concluded that "he who is not pious, cannot be truly wise," he is saying something more. He is saying to the reader that if one is to gain that noetic vision of the whole which is rendered visible by this science, one must have no share in the conceits which are the cause of all the errors and distortions of this whole. One must rid oneself of the conceit of scholars (*boria d, dotti*) which impertinently extends familiar

modern categories and modes of thinking into unfamiliar ancient times and places; and, the conceit of the nations (boria delle nazioni), whereby one nation sets itself up above and beyond the ideal eternal history. This insight leads not only to an understanding of the New Science as a science of how philosophical piety functions to render the whole intelligible it also leads to a recognition of how impiety or conceit distorts and fragments the vision of the whole.

The central task of Vico's thought is not to develop a philosophical anthropology as is commonly thought but to redeem philosophy from traditional metaphysics, from the conceptual word and from rationalistic ethics. Understanding Vico's thought as a redemption of philosophy from traditional metaphysics reveals how his science functions to liberate philosophy from the inherent conceit which plagues the history of metaphysics: the conceit of attempting to attain an apprehension of Being, of the whole, on the basis of a kind of thinking appropriate only for beings. In his own way, therefore, Vico was fully cognizant not only of the ontological difference but also of how a failure to realize this difference is ultimately due to conceit. His thought also functions to liberate philosophy from the inherent conceit of the conceptual word. The conceptual word is the expression of conceit when it presumes to be able to reveal the whole. This whole, however, is not a being. But concepts refer always to beings. Thus when it attempts to express the primary sense of Being, conceptual thinking is an expression of conceit or impiety. The barbarism of the concept not only forgets its own metaphorical origin, but makes impossible any apprehension of the whole. Vico's New Science functions to redeem philosophy from the inherent conceit of rationalistic ethics. As an alternative to imprudent ethics Vico develops the ancient phronesis and Renaissance notion of prudentia. Here we should notice the impiety or conceit at the basis of any ethic which attempts to determine what ought to be done in the here and now on the basis of previously established rules which are to determine action within the historical situation. Such a practice is impious because it denies any openness or receptivity on the part of man to what is given in the historical situation.

By focusing on how Vico's thought delivers philosophy from the subjectivity of the metaphysics of beings, from the primacy of the conceptual word and from rationalistic ethics, our recollection of Vico serves to disclose a new way to view the New Science, one which not only satisfies Heidegger's call for a more primordial way of thinking, but, since it is rooted explicitly in philology, in the particularity and certainty of what has been given to man, it reveals Vico's New Science as a genuine phenomenology of the historical appearance of the human world, one that does not fly off into an abstract ontology of Being. It reveals Vico's science as a vision of man's historical engagement in the concrete history of the truth of Being.

Our recollection of Vico makes it clear why Vico ends his New Science the way he does. For he enables us to realize that the vision of the whole which the New Science renders visible is, at the same time, a vision of the oblivion of poetic wisdom. The loss of poetic wisdom, in other words, is due to man's conceit which necessarily forgets all exteriority or otherness. Such conceit thus imprisons man to the confines of his own subjectivity, prohibiting any ingress into what is common to all.

Vico concludes his science of the principles of humanity declaring that from everything set forth in this work it is to be finally concluded that "he who is not pious cannot be truly wise" because his science moves beyond philosophical conceit. Vico's science allows us to understand how piety and wisdom belong together for he shows us

s why the whole story of human existence cannot be apprehended on the basis of any attempt to turn Being, which remains unfamiliar, into something familiar, namely into a being. The whole remains transcendent. But although Vico's sense of Being is one that preserves the transcendent aspect of Being, to the extent that it is not a being, Being is at the same time, present within human historicity, appearing as its hidden order and abysmal ground. By preserving Vico's conception of the simultaneous immanence and transcendence of the whole, his sense of an embodied transcendence which inwardly animates the human world by being its other, we become alerted to the futility and danger of attempting to turn what remains unfamiliar into something familiar. Vico's science teaches that the relation of the thinker to Being is not a frontal relation of the spectator to the spectacle, it is rather one in which the thinker finds this whole recurring within his own mind, as something that modulates and modifies his mind. His science leads us to recognize the necessity of preserving the otherness of the whole, of philosophical piety, for a science of wisdom. From this recognition of the limits of human knowledge we come to the realization that the highest knowledge of divine and human things must remain, properly speaking, human wisdom.

文章添加: [未已](#) 最后编辑:

点击数:1272 本周点击数:1 [打印本页](#) [推荐给好友](#) [站内收藏](#) [联系管理员](#)

相关评论 (只显示最新5条)

没有找到相关评论

[加入收藏](#) | [关于我们](#) | [投稿须知](#) | [版权申明](#) |

| [设为首页](#) |

[思问哲学网](#) Copyright (c) 2002—2005

四川大学哲学系·四川大学伦理研究中心 主办

蜀ICP备05015881号